gameinformer®

THE WORLD'S #1 VIDEO GAME MAGAZINE

GameStop

POWERUP REWARDS™

AS A PRO, NOBODY SCORES MORE THAN YOU

PowerUp Rewards Pro members get perks and rewards worthy of the best in gaming. Here are some of the great benefits you score:

FEATURED BENEFIT OF THE MONTH

PRO MEMBERS NOW GET

2X POINTS

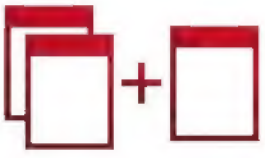
ON NEARLY EVERY PURCHASE*

Need more points? No problem. Get the rewards you want faster than ever. It's kind of like cheating, only encouraged.

$50 IN EXCLUSIVE OFFERS EVERY MONTH

10% OFF PRE-OWNED GAMES AND ACCESSORIES

BUY 2 GET 1 FREE OFFER ON PRE-OWNED GAMES (WORTH UP TO $55)



10% EXTRA CREDIT WHEN YOU TRADE GAMES AND ACCESSORIES

12 ISSUES OF GAME INFORMER MAGAZINE

Your PowerUp Rewards benefits are now available anywhere. Download the GameStop App to get the most from your membership.

*Excludes the purchase of GameStop Gift Cards.

PRO MEMBER EXCLUSIVES

SAVE $20

Far Cry Primal

Also on PS4, PC

Offer valid 10/19/16 - 10/25/16.
Valid towards a new copy of Far Cry Primal. Valid for Pro members only. While supplies last. Coupon required. GameStop, Inc. reserves the right to cancel, terminate, modify or suspend the offer for any reason without notice.

SAVE $25

Tom Clancy's The Division

Also on PS4, PC

Offer valid 10/19/16 - 10/25/16.
Valid towards a new copy of Tom Clancy's The Division. Valid for Pro members only. While supplies last. Coupon required. GameStop, Inc. reserves the right to cancel, terminate, modify or suspend the offer for any reason without notice.

SAVE $10

select refurbished headsets

Offer valid 10/19/16 - 10/26/16.
Valid for Pro members only. While supplies last. Coupon required. GameStop, Inc. reserves the right to cancel, terminate, modify or suspend the offer for any reason without notice.

GO PRO GET MORE

MORE**POINTS** MORE**SAVINGS** MORE**EXCLUSIVES**

- 2x points on nearly every item (excluding GameStop Gift Cards)
- 10% extra credit on games and accessories
- 10% off pre-owned games and accessories
- Buy 2 Get 1 Free offer on pre-owned games (worth up to $55)

$14.99/yr

Plus, all Pro members get 12 issues of Game Informer magazine!

Celebrating 25 Years Of Game Informer

ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
andy@gameinformer.com

Read my column or comment on this letter at gameinformer.com/mag or follow @GI_AndyMc

Believe it or not, *Game Informer*'s first issue debuted 25 years ago. That first issue featured Sonic the Hedgehog and came out in the fall of 1991. That first issue was only 16 pages and quarterly, but it was a start.

Here we are 282 issues later, still going. It's a pretty amazing feat when you think about it. Nirvana's *Nevermind* hit in September of that year, which I felt changed a lot of things in pop culture. *Game Informer* didn't quite have that same effect on the world at large, as it was a very humble beginning. The issue was so tiny I often heard people call it a "flyer," but to me it was so much more than that. It was a chance to tell people about gaming, an entertainment medium that was still looking for mainstream acceptance.

Back then I was a wide-eyed teenager, and had a chip on my shoulder because gaming, a thing I loved and still love to this day, was viewed by so many in a negative light. Gaming and pop culture have changed so much since those early days, and I'm proud to say that I think *Game Informer* has grown with gaming as we reach over six million people each month.

We have been lucky to have so many talented writers, designers, and team members here on staff and supporting *Game Informer* throughout the world.

We have been lucky to have so many amazing readers over the years who have supported us and made us the fourth-largest consumer publication in the U.S.

We have been lucky that the game industry is full of so many talented developers and publishers who make so many fantastic and engrossing games.

And finally, we have been lucky to have the opportunity to help gamers find games they love and get the most out of what I feel is the most important and impactful entertainment medium we have in the world today.

We aren't here without you, our readers, and we simply can't thank you enough. Let's hope for another 25!

Enjoy the issue.

Cheers,

48 South Park: The Fractured But Whole

Despite their original reticence, South Park creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone are back for a sequel. This time they're partnering with Ubisoft for a much bigger experience that will bring the game even closer to being an interactive representation of the show. Read on to learn all about the hilarious super hero adventure coming next year. ***by Ben Reeves***

04 Feedback

20 Massive: World Of Warcraft: Legion

28 Impulse: The Games Of PAX West 2016

30 Gamer: Marinko Gaming Posters

33 The Good, The Bad, And The Ugly

38 Top Ten Politicans

44 Gear: PS4 Slim

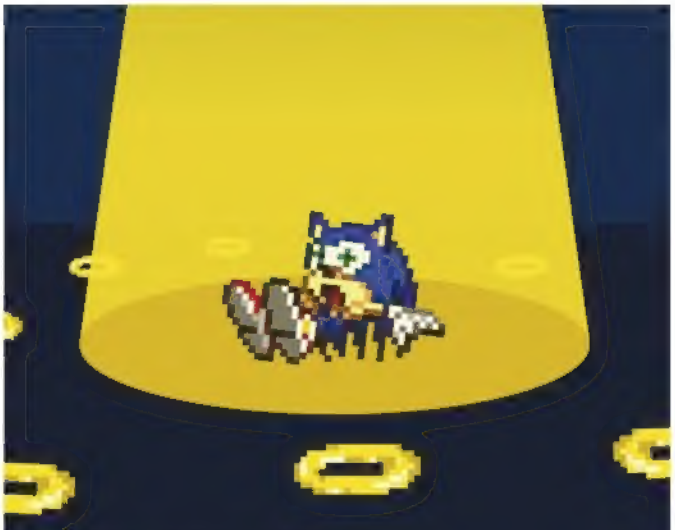
46 Timeline

62 Previews

76 Reviews

92 Classic: Ranking The First-Party Controllers

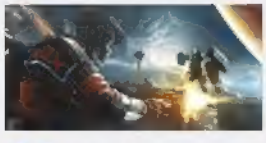
96 Game Over: South Parks To Watch Before Fractured



22 Where Sonic Went Wrong
Sonic the Hedgehog is undeniably important to the history of video games. But he has fallen from grace since his Genesis days, and we analyze why in great detail.

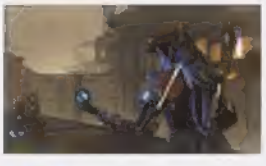
34 The Evolution Of The Adventure Genre
The designation "adventure" has meant different things to different generations of gamers.

32 Nathan Fillion
We ask the nerd-hero actor about his time in video games as a performer and fan.



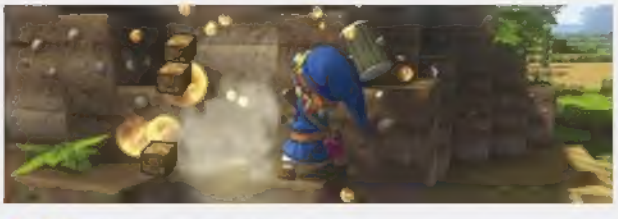
62 Call Of Duty: Infinite Warfare
The next Call of Duty retains the series' excellent shooting, but is a whole new sci-fi beast.

66 The Last Guardian
We've been waiting years for the next game from the creator of Ico, and it's almost here.



86 ReCore
The team-up between Metroid: Prime and Mega Man's creators is not quite what we hoped.

84 World Of Final Fantasy
Final Fantasy's latest spin-off is a weird one, but it is cute.



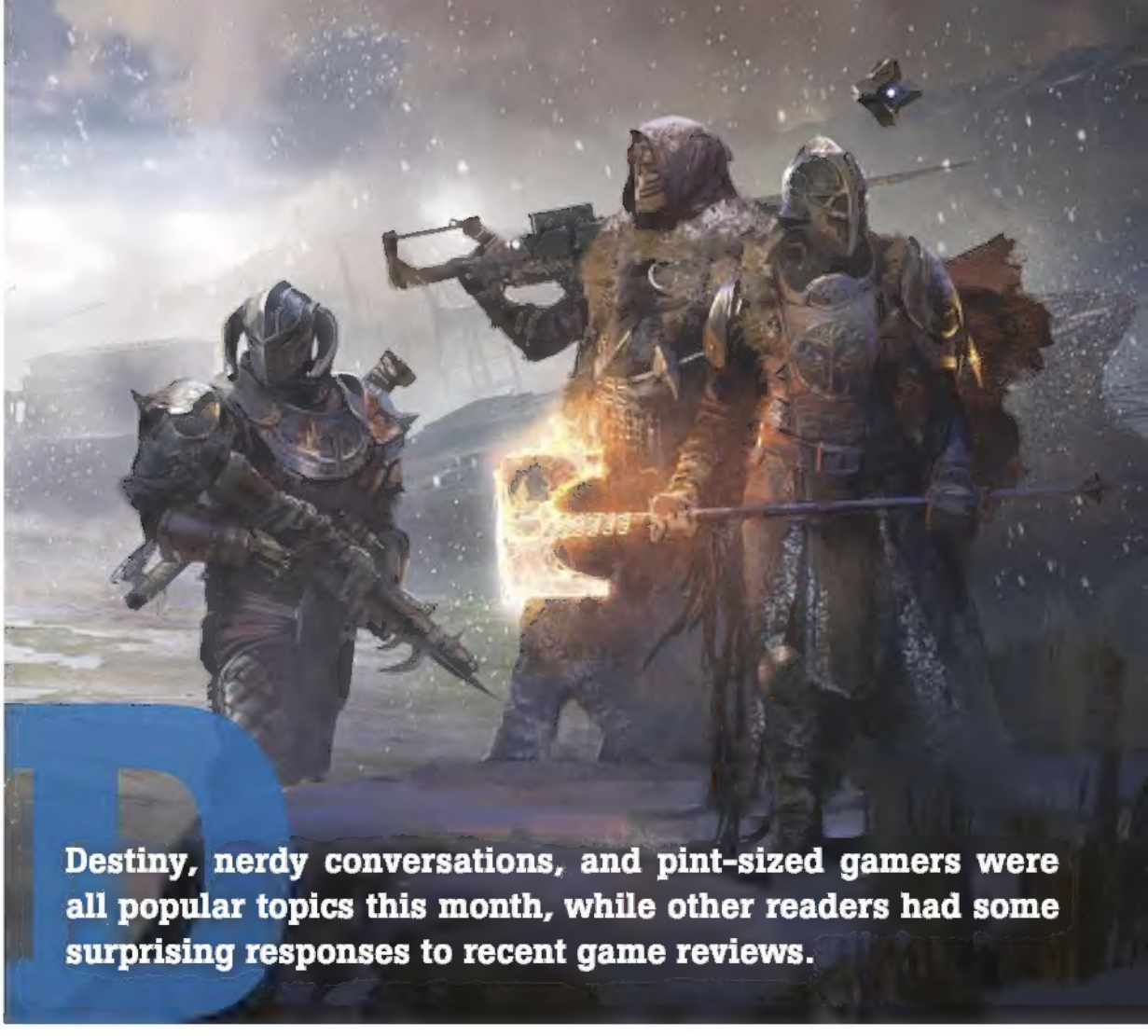
85 Dragon Quest Builders
This world-builder/Dragon Quest mash-up is one you'll want to play, even if you don't know the series.

Correction: *In last issue's Dead Rising 4 feature, we spelled Joe Nickoli's name incorrectly.*

games index

Accounting 15
Atlas Reactor 28
Batman: The Telltale Series – Episode Two: Childen of Arkham 90
Birthdays the Beginning 68
Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare 62
Call of Duty: Modern Warfare Remastered 64
Church in the Darkness 28
Destiny: Rise of Iron 78
Divinity: Original Sin 2 72
Dragon Quest Builders 85
FIFA 17 82
For Honor 65
Forza Horizon 3 87
Gonner 28
Hob 28
Last Guardian, The 66
Legend of Heroes: Trails of Cold Steel II, The 90
NASCAR Heat Evolution 90
NBA 2K17 80
NHL 17 81
Nioh 74
Obduction 90
Old Man's Journey 28
Osiris 70
Overcooked 90
Pac-Man Championship Edition 2 89
Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney – Spirit of Justice 90
Pokémon Sun & Moon 69
Pro Evolution Soccer 17 83
ReCore 86
Secret Legend 28
Shin Megami Tensei IV: Apocalypse 90
Sonic Boom: Fire & Ice 90
South Park: The Fractured But Whole 48
Super Mario Maker 75
Toejam and Earl: Back In the Groove 71
Torment: Tides of Numenera 73
Turing Test, The 79
Virginia 88
World of Final Fantasy 84
World of Warcraft: Legion 20

feedback



Destiny, nerdy conversations, and pint-sized gamers were all popular topics this month, while other readers had some surprising responses to recent game reviews.

Destined For Controversy

I really liked your cover story on Destiny's Rise of Iron expansion (issue 281). It was nice to get a look at some of the new armor and weapons we can expect. I also really liked the in-depth profile of the new alien group, the Devil Splicers. Destiny is one of my favorite games, so new information is always appreciated.

Steven Carr
via email

I have been a loyal reader for several years now, and I am disappointed in the transformation of this magazine. I look forward to reading about games in development and viewing the cover art for a much-anticipated game. With this month's issue, as well as a couple of past issues, you seem to have lost your way. Destiny has been a disappointment since its release, managing to hold the interest of a relatively small portion of the gaming community. Yet this month you find it necessary to once again devote the cover to new DLC for an almost two-year-old game. Let it go.

Rick Dunn
via email

We knew putting Rise of Iron on the cover would garner its share of hate mail, but we didn't devote 16 pages to Destiny's latest expansion to annoy the haters – that's more of a happy bonus. The real reason is Destiny remains incredibly popular, with a pool of more than 30 million registered players, millions of whom still log on each and every week. Destiny fans also still make up a large and ravenous portion of our readership, and Bungie had plenty of new information to share, making it an easy choice for a cover.

Still Not Over Overwatch

Every now and then I pick up one of my husband's issues and take a look at your reviews. I am in no way a "gamer" – my most effective move is to turn around in circles, shoot aimlessly, and hope that the game gods favor me. However, there is one game that has me reaching for the controller night after night. That's why I was surprised to see the angry Feedback responses to your Overwatch review (Overwoof, issue 281). Yes the game is simple, but I believe that's also why it's successful. Everyone starts on the same playing field, which is a huge benefit to players like me – I can play against higher-level players and still defeat them. I don't have to worry about my opponent having a super fancy, kill-without-aiming gun with an endless ammo clip. The only upgrade in Overwatch is your own skill level, and it doesn't come from coins, killing 500 of a certain thing, or microtransactions. It comes from playing real people on an even playing field. Because of that, Overwatch is an incredibly fun, play-until-sunrise game for players of all skill levels, from professional League of Legends competitors to 360-degree shooters like myself.

Catie Whetton
via email

Ironically, Overwatch's pure focus on skill does indeed make it more accessible to gamers of all levels, and you don't need to reach the Grandmaster tier of Competitive mode to have a blast. Overwatch's multiplayer-only offerings may not appeal to everyone, but you can't fault those who are loving the competitive action. Well, you can, but that just seems petty.

Contact Us
feedback@gameinformer.com

Kidding Around

I really appreciated Andrew Reiner's recent article, How To Introduce Your Toddler To Gaming (issue 281). He's definitely right that there aren't many games appropriate for children, but it never occurred to me that even Mario or Sonic could be seen as too violent or scary. I grew up with those games, but I see where he is coming from. My parents also closely monitored games that I bought, and it wasn't until I was 17 that I convinced my dad to let me buy an M-rated game. Looking back, I really appreciate that my parents set those limits. I applaud Reiner for taking his father role so seriously. Hopefully developers will take notice of this untapped market and challenge themselves to make games that are both engaging and appropriate for younger audiences.

Kaleb Hammes
via email

I really enjoyed Reiner's advice on how to introduce young children to gaming, which I will be using with my own little daughter, Penelope. I hear Reiner and Kyle talk about their children on the podcast and the Chronicles video series sometimes, so it was great to see him sharing more personal stories with the magazine audience as well. I look forward to similar articles that highlight the authors and not just the games.

Eddy Bouza
via email

Reiner's account of gaming with his daughter elicited appreciative responses from a number of parents struggling with the same issues. Now if we could only teach kids how to be more gracious when they beat us at Call of Duty...

No Man's Caveat?

No Man's Sky is not a game. It would be better described as "console entertainment," if I can coin a phrase. There are no points, no competition, no ridiculous gun battles, no superhuman abilities, no clear-cut pathway to "win" the game. I love it! The discovery and trade aspects are well thoughtout and compelling, and the best part for me is the absolutely immense universe to explore. Some reviews and Internet naysayers complain about the lack of FPS tactics and MMORPG battles. To me these individuals do not understand what No Man's Sky is actually about. There's a multitude of games that let you vicariously dispense gratuitous violence; if you are looking for that, look elsewhere. No Man's Sky has been the most anticipated title of all time for me, and I am old enough to remember when Pong was new. I really enjoy this title and look forward to many more hours of exploration and trade to come. I don't expect a high score from G.I. due to some of the flaws, repetitiveness, and lack of aforementioned features. This will in no way affect the appeal of No Man's Sky to me.

Mitch Tharp
via email

You don't need to disqualify No Man's Sky from being a game in order to justify your enjoyment, Mitch – nowadays there are entire genres that forgo traditional mechanics in favor of different experiences, and they are games nonetheless. Some players have raised legitimate questions about what was cut from No Man's Sky, and our reviewer Matt Miller brought up his own concerns as he awarded the game a 7.5. But you're right; you shouldn't let those opinions – or silly definitions – stop you from having fun.

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"Does everyone really think that any significant percentage of customers will be deciding between the Xbox One S and Project Scorpio?"

Not really.

"When in the actual name of the Nameless King's left nut is the Dark Souls 3 DLC coming out?"

October 25. Sheesh.

"If you don't give one of Activision's games a stellar review, what do you lose?"

A few cranky emails from readers who can't accept that a review is an opinion.

Worst News Tip Of The Month:

"If you are worried about that ex love you desperately want back, you have come to the right place."

Question Of The Month:

What's the number-one thing you want to see in Destiny 2?

gi spy

PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

(Left) The team leads at Ubisoft San Francisco smiled politely during our litany of Fractured but Whole puns this month, which is about all we can ask for. **(Right)** This year's Brasil Game Show proved the perfect place to launch the new Brazilian/Portuguese edition of *Game Informer*. Over 250,000 gamers converged on Sao Paulo for the show.

- Nerdy Game Conversations
- Appreciative Parent Gamers
- Overwatch Defenders
- "Yay, More Destiny!"
- "Boo, More Destiny!"

Nerd Talk

In issue 281, we asked readers to share their nerdiest game conversations with us. We'd love to make fun of them, but you know what they say about gamers living in glass houses...

Remember when Nintendo dropped a bombshell with the official Zelda timeline and the whole three-way time-split thing, and then gave us the worst cop-out of an explanation ever for it? My friend and I ranted forever about how Nintendo doesn't know anything about how time travel works. We even created our own uber complex theory; I still consider it canon over Nintendo's own reasoning to this day.

Jahred Wilson

The nerdiest video game conversation I had was when a couple of friends and I got into a huge discussion about the game relations and other facts of Star Wars canon. It went on for a week and a half during school!

Tyler Binggeli

My boyfriend and I get into a (mostly) friendly argument approximately once a week about the relative merits of console vs. PC gaming. I'm a Sony girl, and he's a PC gamer. I'd rather play with a controller, and he's all about the WASD/mouse combo. He's very excited about 60 frames per second, while I legitimately cannot see the difference. I don't think this will ever be resolved.

Rachel Kohler

Well Played

I can't believe it! Your I am Setsuna review was completely just and fair. How much did you get paid to write such an accurate and reasonable review? I almost threw my October issue away due to your well-thought-out B.S.

Amy LaCount
Bend, OR

Behold, rational JRPG fans really do exist – and some of them even have a sense of humor to boot!

Time Out

You included One Piece Burning Blood's release date in issue 277's Timeline, but there wasn't a review in any of the following issues. I realize it may not be a very popular game, but it's a game nonetheless, so shouldn't there be a review? Will Attack on Titan get the same treatment? I certainly hope not, and I think that if the games are worth mentioning in Timeline, they should get a review.

Shawn Alicie
via email

We'd love to review every game that comes out, but there simply aren't enough hours in the day (or pages in the magazine) to cover everything. However, we did check both One Piece and Attack on Titan out in our Test Chamber video series, which you can view at gameinformer.com.

(Left) A biking accident left E.I.C. Andy McNamara with a broken femur and a lot of bed rest, but at least he has Destiny's Rise of Iron to keep him busy. Send your well wishes to: andy@gameinformer.com. **(Right)** Shea spoke with Sega's Kazuyuki Hoshino and Takashi Iizuka for his in-depth look at Sonic's development, which you can read on page 22.

(continued on page 8)

Maybe Starburst juiciness comes from MC Hammer's juicy raindance.
Shazam this ad to see Hammer do his thing. #juicytheory
Starburst
UNEXPLAINABLY JUICY™

gallery

WINNER

1 Ashlyn Shuler

Eevee has about a billion evolutions, and yet somehow Pikachu is the star of the show? Talk about injustice. Adorable injustice

2 Kevin Sadler

Kirby is so powerful, he's capable of sucking up our entire existence. Unlike Sonic, who just sucks up whatever game he's in

3 Taylor Stahnke

What happens when you mix Mario, Pokémon, and Alice in Wonderland in a blender? Nightmares

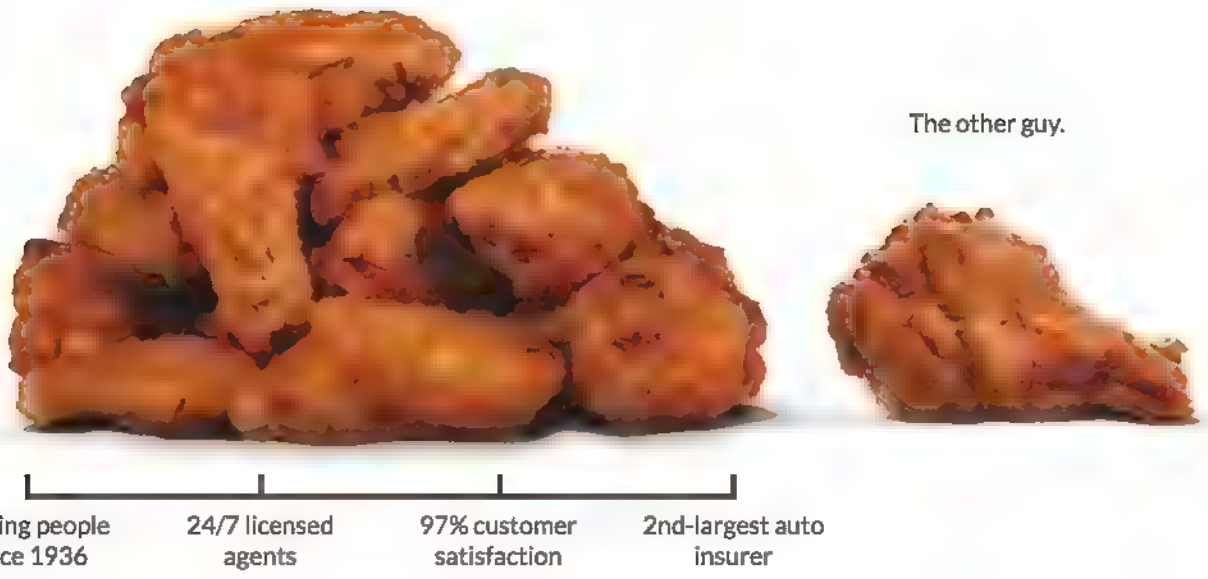
4 Gabriel

We don't know what's going on in little Gabriel's montage, but it's awesome

» Submit your art for a chance to win our monthly prize. Please include your name and return address. Entries become the property of Game Informer and cannot be returned. Send to: Game Informer Reader Art Contest, 724 First Street North, 3rd Floor, Minneapolis, MN 55401 | Email to: ReaderArt@gameinformer.com

(Left) G.I. said goodbye to another class of outstanding interns this month, who insist on recreating Beatles album covers wherever they go. From left to right: Leo Vader, Blake Hester, Andrew Moser, and Haley MacLean. **(Right)** Jeff Cork came up with an innovative way to spell "Joe Nickolls" in issue 282's Dead Rising 4 preview. Fortunately, Capcom Vancouver's studio director is a good sport (with help from art director Geoff Coates).

GEICO



The choice is yours, and it's simple.

Why enjoy just one chicken wing when there's a whole plate in front of you?

The same goes for car insurance. Why go with a company that offers just a low price when GEICO could save you hundreds and give you so much more? You could enjoy satisfying professional service, 24/7, from a company that's made it their business to help people since 1936. This winning combination has helped GEICO to become the 2nd-largest private passenger auto insurer in the nation.

Make the smart choice. Get your free quote from GEICO today.

GEICO®

geico.com | 1-800-947-AUTO | Local Office

Some discounts, coverages, payment plans and features are not available in all states or all GEICO companies. Customer satisfaction based on an independent study conducted by Alan Newman Research, 2015. GEICO is the second largest private passenger auto insurer in the United States according to the 2014 A.M. Best market share report, published April 2015. GEICO is a registered service mark of Government Employees Insurance Company, Washington, D.C. 20076; a Berkshire Hathaway Inc. subsidiary. © 2016 GEICO

4K Is

*Kind of. Sort of.

NOTABLES

14 rick and morty's co-creator embraces w

26 massive: world of warcraft: legion

22 where sonic went wrong

28 impulse: the games of pax west

32 an interview with nathan fillion

the twisted evolution of the adventure genre

the legal challenges o pokémon go

Here*

It's complicated.

With the announcement of the PlayStation 4 Pro, both Sony and Microsoft have consoles that can take advantage of new 4K displays. The question remains: Is the market ready? ***by Jeff Cork***

Sony revealed the PlayStation 4 Pro console at a New York event last month, making official the rumored system previously known as PlayStation Neo. PlayStation president Andrew House said the console wasn't a replacement to the existing PS4 – which itself is getting a slimmer revision – but is instead tailored for hardcore players who demand the very best in console gaming. The hardware includes a more-powerful GPU and faster processor, but the news was accompanied with a generous helping of confusion.

House did his best to reassure the audience the system would complement the existing PS4 family, not overtake it. Developers can tap into the additional power to output their games at higher resolutions, lock in steadier or even higher framerates, and stream 4K content from providers such as Netflix and YouTube. That all came with a few important caveats, however.

The games on hand, including Horizon Zero Dawn, Spider-Man, and Uncharted 4, didn't feature native 4K output. Instead, they were upscaled using a proprietary form of rendering that's only possible with the extra oomph that the new GPU, based on AMD's budget-minded Polaris chipset, can manage. "There's a lot of magic sauce happening and it's all very complicated – it's not native 4K, but it is perceptively so close that you wouldn't be able to see the difference with normal human eyes," said Jan-Bart van Beek, art director at Guerrilla Games.

Surprisingly, the console doesn't play the new generation of 4K Blu-ray discs – something competitor Microsoft was happy to gloat over after the event, since its Xbox One S does feature that functionality.

The biggest game-changer from that night was the console's inclusion of high dynamic range (HDR) lighting. When used with a supported display, this technology expands the visual range of on-screen colors and contrast. Explosions lit up the darkness in the zombie game Days Gone with a brightness that made people wince. At the same time, dazzling light shows, such as the ones shown in a version of Infamous: First Light (which is having HDR capability patched in), didn't wash out the rest of the colors. Instead, subtle details were visible in the shadows, even as the action was lit up in blazing neon.

Developers we spoke with have been equally impressed with the possibility HDR offers. "I think the biggest thing will be HDR, because it's quite a paradigm shift in how you deal with color," van Beek said. He cites the freedom his team of artists will have, getting them one step closer to showing off the majesty of nature and something closer to its rich palette of color and tone.

The thing is, while you will likely need to buy a new 4K display to enjoy what HDR has to offer, you won't need a PlayStation 4 Pro. Saying the effects aren't hardware-intensive, Sony released a patch for all existing PS4 consoles to support HDR. That's a great move for consumers, but a potential strike against the necessity of picking up a $399 PS4 Pro.

A 4K REFRESHER

Let's take a step backward and look at 4K in general. If you haven't been to an electronics store or thought about upgrading your TV in a while, you may not have heard much about 4K. Odds are, if you bought your television in the past few years, you have a 1080p set that displays images at a resolution of 1,920 by 1,080 pixels. That means a 4K set runs at something by 4,000 pixels, right? Nope. A 4K display (sometimes called ultra high definition, or UHD) outputs video at 3,840 by 2,160 pixels. Don't let that number fool you – because it's a two dimensional image, the pixel density is actually four times that of your existing 1080p set.

That increased resolution isn't necessarily detectable by your eyeballs, since it depends on the size of your set and how far back you sit from it. (See graphic for a handy reference.) Even if you know what to look for, detecting a noticeable improvement can be tough – especially if you're looking at a set with HDR, since you'll likely be wowed by that in and of itself.

Unlike the last big change in TV formats, 4K has come to the market a little unripe. Few cable or satellite companies are broadcasting in the format, there isn't any over-the-air broadcasting for it, and there are only a handful of UHD Blu-rays to choose from at this point. Netflix, YouTube, and Amazon offer streaming 4K content, but people with bandwidth-capped Internet providers should be careful. Netflix requires a 25 Mbps stream and estimates that an hour of 4K content will use about 7GB of data.

Sets are currently on the pricy side, but – as with most tech – those prices are warning. If you're in the market for something in the 60-inch range, you can expect to pay around $1,500. Along with the 4K capability, the new generation of displays offers a few other goodies, such as HDR support. Standards are still being worked out on that front, however, so do some homework before you try to squeeze one of these new sets into your trunk.

THE CURRENT (AND FUTURE) CONSOLE LANDSCAPE

As it stands, you have a few options available for you if you're looking to get a console for your spiffy new 4K display. The PlayStation 4 Pro shows off games at a higher-than-usual resolution, even if it's not "truly" 4K. The Xbox One S handles UHD Blu-rays and supports HDR lighting, though you won't notice any difference in games themselves.

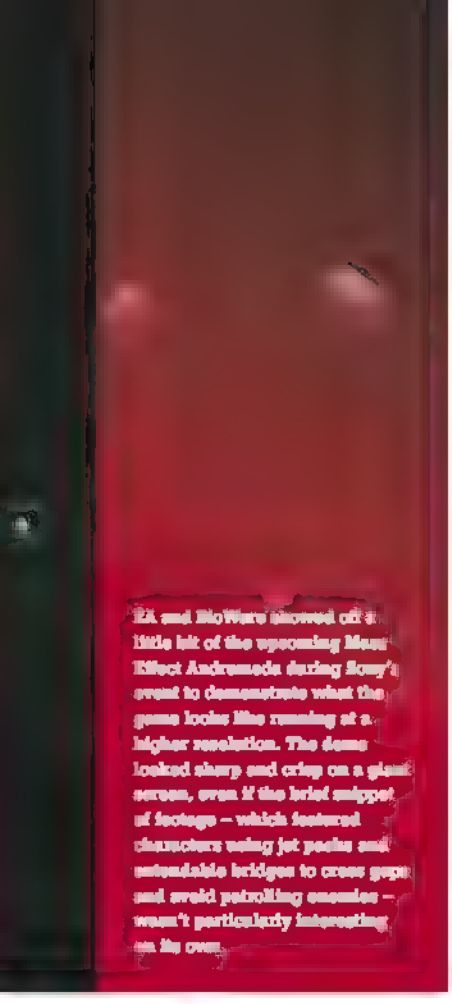
Microsoft plans to reveal its next iteration of the Xbox One late next year, named Project Scorpio. The company says it will be the only console on the market to support full 4K gaming, which means upscaling solutions could be off the table. We'll have to wait to learn more – including how much it'll cost.

Meanwhile, PC gamers – long accustomed to being on the bleeding edge of tech – may be wondering what all the fuss is about. It's still far from overtaking other resolutions, and it is a pricy endeavor, but 4K gaming is and has been possible on PCs for some time now. The difference as it marches toward the console market is that it's going to be more affordable and enticing for your average big-box shopper.

Players won't have to consider different versions of games while shopping

Catching Up With 4K

Upcoming games including For Honor, Spider-Man, and Horizon Zero Dawn are being designed to take advantage of both the 4K resolution and HDR lighting, but Sony says players who buy a PlayStation 4 Pro won't have to wait for new releases to show off their latest toys. Developers will be patching earlier releases to incorporate the new capabilities, including Infamous: Second Son, The Last of Us, Uncharted 4: A Thief's End, and others. Sony's calling these games "forward compatible," and we can expect to see more of the PlayStation 4 library adjusted as we move ahead.



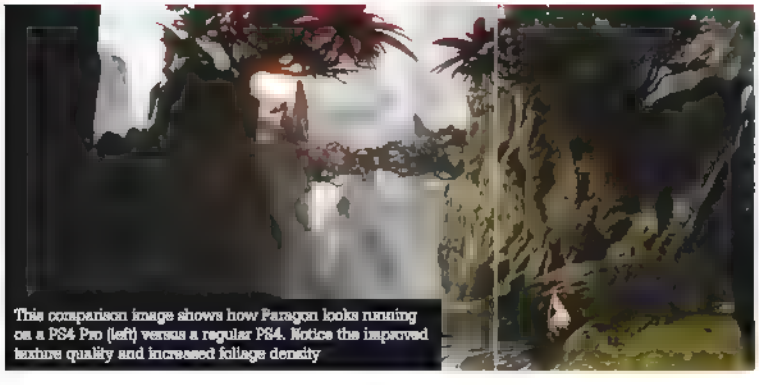
EA and BioWare showed off a little bit of the upcoming Mass Effect Andromeda during Sony's event to demonstrate what the game looks like running at a higher resolution. The demo looked sharp and crisp on a giant screen, even if the brief snippet of footage – which featured characters using jet packs and extendable bridges to cross gaps and avoid patrolling enemies – wasn't particularly interesting on its own.

4K Optional?

Sony also says players don't necessarily need a 4K display to get at least some of the advantages the PS4 Pro offers. While those higher resolutions are obviously off the table in that situation, players who connect a Pro to a 1080p set will still have access to better graphical fidelity and higher or more stable framerates.

Maximum Seating Distance To Perceive 4K Vs. Screen Size*

*Not to scale
Source: HDGuru.com



This comparison image shows how Paragon looks running on a PS4 Pro (left) versus a regular PS4. Notice the improved texture quality and increased foliage density

Consoles already have myriad user settings, and developers tailor their games for various setups. Players who don't have a surround-sound setup get their audio adjusted to better fit what they do have, and aspect ratios and resolutions are adjusted on the fly. Think of this new breed of mid-cycle hardware refreshes as you might a pair of PCs with different specs. Both can run the same games, but the hardware will render the graphics differently based on the hardware available.

"It's not like we have separate teams working on the different consoles," says Herman Hulst, managing director at Guerrilla Games. "I would say that barring maybe one or two technicians that look at the specifics of the hardware, everybody is just making the game... It really isn't something that's going to segment or split up the team at all."

Transition can be tough, and while it's clear manufacturers of displays – including Sony – want consumers to be on board with 4K, it's going to be a tough sell without compelling content. Whether the promise of more alluring graphics is enough to get gamers to open their wallets is something that, like the future of 4K itself, remains to be seen.

In addition to unveiling the PS4 Pro, Sony showed off a smaller revision of the PlayStation 4, which will replace existing models. Learn more on page 44

PS4 Pro, By The Numbers

Here's a look at how the PS4 Pro stacks up against the new baseline PlayStation 4.

PLAYSTATION 4 PRO	PLAYSTATION 4 SLIM
RELEASE: 11/10/2016	RELEASE: 9/15/2016
PRICE: $399.99	PRICE: From $299.99
DIMENSIONS: 11.8 x 12.8 x 2.1	DIMENSIONS: 11.3 x 10.4 x 1.5
CPU: AMD Jaguar x86-64 8 Core Processor	CPU: AMD Jaguar x86-64 8 Core Processor
GPU: AMD Radeon 4.2 TFLOPs	GPU: AMD Radeon 1.84 TFLOPs
SYSTEM MEMORY: 8GB GDDR5	SYSTEM MEMORY: 8GB GDDR5
OPTICAL PORT OUT: Yes	OPTICAL PORT OUT: No
INTERNAL STORAGE: 1TB	INTERNAL STORAGE: 500GB/1TB
AV OUTPUT: HDMI/Optical	AV OUTPUT: HDMI
POWER CONSUMPTION: 310w (max)	POWER CONSUMPTION: 160w (max)
4K BLU-RAY PLAYBACK: No	4K BLU-RAY PLAYBACK: No
4K STREAMING: Yes	4K STREAMING: No
USB: 3x USB 3.1	USB: 2x USB 3.1

THE WEIRD FRONTIER

How Rick and Morty's creator is taking on virtual reality

Opening a studio dedicated to full-length and ambitious virtual reality games is a tricky proposition when consumers still aren't sold on the concept of VR. Justin Roiland, the creator of the hit animated series *Rick and Morty*, and Tanya Watson, a former executive producer for Epic Games, are going for it anyway. The duo announced a new VR-focused studio called Squanchtendo on the eve of this year's PAX West. For now, it's only Roiland, Watson, and "a whole lot of talent waiting in the wings," but the two have big plans for the future.

Roiland is no outsider when it comes to VR games. "I was one of the first Oculus DK1 backers on Kickstarter," he says, grinning broadly. "It shipped and that was the first kind of step where I was like, 'oh my god, oh my god – even without positional [tracking] this is incredible.'" When Roiland got the second version of the device, he filled up notebooks with sketches and ideas. Things started picking up speed when he got the chance to tour Valve.

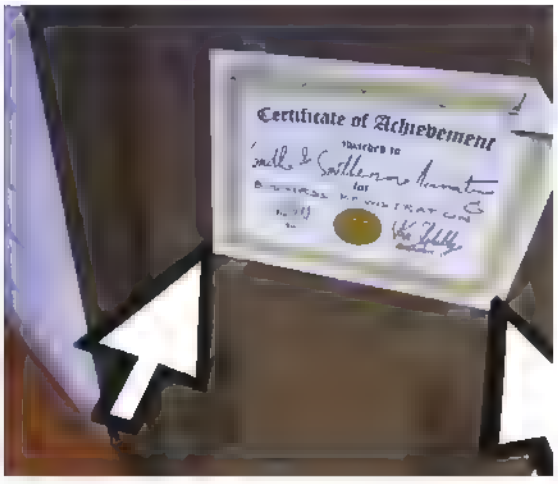
"I took a serendipitous trip to Valve where I had done the *Rick and Morty* voice pack for Dota 2," he says. "One of the first things I got to do was try [Vive] out there. I got put through the old Blu, Job Sim, Tilt Brush, Aperture demo, and I remember getting out of that and just having to sit down for a little bit and process what I had just experienced because I had no idea it could be that immersive."

He talked Valve into giving him a dev kit. Shortly afterward, Roiland reached out to various developers like Owlchemy Labs to bounce ideas off of them and see what concepts could and couldn't work in virtual reality. "People like William Pugh [co-creator of The Stanley Parable], I would Skype with him and I would ask him 'Would you be able to mock up something in Unity for me?' and then I'd go into it and see, 'Oh this is really cool, but I can see why it's not going to work. It makes me a little nauseous.'"

Roiland and his agent began to look for a producer who could help his ideas take real form. Game designer Cliff Bleszinski eventually connected Roiland with Watson, whose game credits include Bulletstorm, Gears of War, and Unreal Tournament. After a series of long phone calls, the two decided the partnership could be a prosperous one. "Her strengths were my weaknesses," Roiland says.

"When I met Justin, I was very skeptical," Watson admits. "I was like 'Oh, another one of these creative guys.' We would run into them all the time, people who want to dip their toes into game development. But I was really impressed with just how thoughtful he had been. He had clearly just spent a lot of time thinking gameplay mechanics – 'how would this be fun?' and 'how does this mechanic serve this purpose?'"

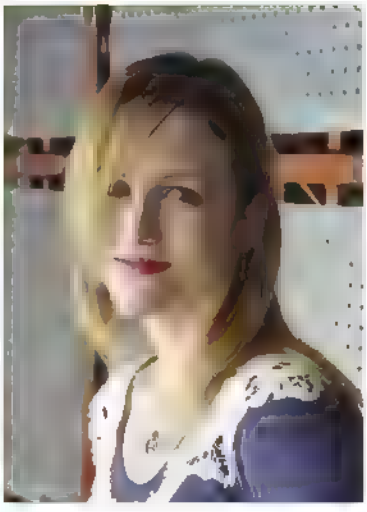
Watson says his optimism was also a factor in her deciding to help co-found the studio. "In game development, we're always like, 'We can't do that because we tried that five years ago and it didn't work.' That sort of stuff happens all the time,



Anything But By The Numbers

The first project from Squanchtendo is Accounting, a five-minute VR demo made in collaboration with Crows Crows Crows, the studio founded by The Stanley Parable co-creator William Pugh. The demo casts you as an accountant who, while trying to follow some instructions shouted loudly at them from a nearby messaging machine, ends up putting on a VR headset and getting sucked into strange, various scenarios.

The demo is a tad meta and the sort of full-on wacky experience you'd expect in a *Rick and Morty* episode, though this has nothing to do with the show. During my demo, I cut open a giant troll and stole his guts, poured acid on a skeletal xylophone and myself, was yelled at by a ghost living in a tree stump, and accidently caused a forest fire. Though brief, it immediately sets itself apart from the pack of other VR demos out there by being unrepentantly odd. If you have a Vive, you can try the game out for yourself at accountingvr.com.



but Justin doesn't have any of that baggage with him."

The biggest challenge the studio faces is the same one all of VR development is facing right now: how to get consumers to buy the devices. A definitive answer has yet to emerge, but Roiland and Watson are hopeful public demo units will help get more people to bring the devices in their homes. "VR is not something you can explain to people," Watson says. "You have to put them in it and give them a really good experience, but then you see their eyes go wide and they get it. I'm hoping the VRcades is going to be one of those ways, and people who have never tried it before are walking by and see it and decide to stop by and try it. I think word of mouth will help people get into it."

"If I had a barcade, I'd hook up a couple of Vives and let people rent them out, kind of like private karaoke rooms," Roiland says. "I also think that it's going to take some killer apps and really well done ports, like what Bethesda is doing with Fallout 4. I actually stopped playing the game because I want to play it *this* way. But yeah, more story-driven, immersive experiences are needed to sell these things."

Memorable, immersive experiences are exactly the kind of creations that Squanchtendo intends to create, but the duo is starting from the ground up and fully featured games take a long time and money to make. However, both Watson and Roiland's determination and the amusing VR demo Accounting (pictured) are promising signs that they might just make this gamble pay off.

COLLECTING HISTORY

by Andrew Reiner

How a small publisher is bringing digital games to disc

The saying "nothing lasts forever" holds surprising weight in video games, especially within the digital landscape. Publishers can flip a switch to permanently delete a game, leaving behind nothing but fond memories and video evidence that it existed at one time. This is something that will likely happen to most massive multiplayer games, which require extensive funding and resources to keep alive. Once the player base dries up, its days are numbered.

While MMO lifespans seem finite, any digital-only release could potentially be removed from a marketplace if the publisher or developer chooses. Konami pulled the popular Silent Hills demo P.T. after the core game was canceled, Microsoft ended 1 vs. 100, and Marvel recently shut down Marvel: Avengers Academy – a move that shocked an active and healthy fan base that was still investing money into it. As new hardware is introduced into the marketplace, what happens to the previous generation of digital-only games? That's the big question that looms over the digital era, and we're about to find out with the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360.

Enter Limited Run Games, a publisher that focuses on preserving digital-only releases by transforming them into physical releases. Josh Fairhust, the co-founder of Limited Run, bemoans the digital focus the video game industry has embraced. He has firsthand experience with this trend as a developer of various titles at Mighty Rabbit Studios. "I've been developing games for about six years now, and it pains me to know that games I've been pouring my life into are these digital products that will probably be forgotten 10 years down the line, when the services that host them are shut down," he says. "They'll be gone into the ether, and won't have any kind of lasting legacy. That bothers me."

Fairhust began looking at ways to bring his games to physical formats, but kept running into walls. Financing a physical release was the first problem. Developing relationships with the right people at Sony, Microsoft, and Nintendo was another. He then saw that Brian Provinciano of Vblank Entertainment released Retro City Rampage as a physical release for PlayStation platforms. If this game could be transformed into a physical product, Fairhust knew he could follow similar steps to get his games on disc. The pathway was somewhat paved for him to explore his options. "I figured if I learned the whole process for my games, I could take that knowledge and use it to help other developers," he says.

Fairhurst didn't roll the cash he made off of his games into future projects. He instead took that money to help bring other developers' titles to physical formats. "If I can take away those big barriers of money and work, I can make [physical releases] a reality for more people, and a way for them to make more money off of their existing games."

Douglas Bogart, the other co-founder of Limited Run, says that they put together a wishlist of developers they would like to work with and games they would love to see as physical releases. They contacted these developers first, but also brought some of Fairhust's work at Mighty Rabbit Studios to physical formats. Limited Run Games' first release was Fairhust's Breach & Clear. They made 1,500 copies of it.

"We weren't sure it was going to do well," Fairhust remembers. "We thought it would take weeks to sell through that, but we ended up selling out in 108 minutes. It completely blew away our expectations. We were planning fully to only sell 400 copies, go out of business, and bulldoze the other 1,100 copies. I'm glad it worked out."

The physical version of Breach & Clear launched on October 29, 2015. Since then, Limited Run has worked with developers to turn 11 additional titles into packaged goods. This catalog ranges from little-known titles like Futuridium and Lost Sea to critically acclaimed and well-recognized games like Oddworld: New 'n' Tasty and Shadow Complex. The latter was an odd partnership for Limited Run, as it is owned by Epic Games.

"We're based out of Cary, North Carolina, and Epic is a stone's throw from us," Fairhust says. "One of the guys who works there, the engine evangelist, he was meeting with us to try and get our development company to use Unreal, and move away from Unity. Two months prior I sent him an email asking him if he was interested in releasing Shadow Complex through us, and I got pretty far at that time, but it wasn't until we met for lunch to discuss Unreal that I mentioned we brought Oddworld on to do their physical release. When he heard that he was

like 'Maybe we should think about doing this.' From there we were able to get them onboard."

Shadow Complex is Limited Run's biggest hit, producing a run of 7,500 units – 5,000 of which sold out in two hours. Once a game sells out, that's it, hence the company name. The average run for a game is around 2,500 to 3,000 copies, but Bogart says they just signed a new partner and game to a 10,000-unit run.

For Limited Run to break even on a game, they need to sell roughly a third or quarter of the inventory. Getting stuck with extra units can be a liability, as warehousing them is expensive, but so far the company hasn't run into that problem. Everything is selling, and fast.

Regarding the preservation of games, Limited Run wants the discs to represent the entire game. This means no DLC or patches post release, if possible. "No codes at all," Fairhurst adds. "When I talk to our partners, I say 'If you want to do DLC, no codes in the box; let's wrap it in with the game and put it on the disc. We want these games to be standalone things that will last for years."

Bogart says that developers are now flocking to them to see if they can join forces. Part of the allure is games having a second chance at life. The attractive revenue sharing doesn't hurt either. Fairhurst says Limited Run pays for all of the costs of production upfront. "It's usually several tens of thousands of dollars to do a run, anywhere from $50,000 to $60,000 for PS4 and Vita games, and after we recoup that it's a 70/30 revenue share split. That's pretty standard, and what you get from most digital-distribution services."

The physical versions of the games are a little bit more expensive than their digital counterparts. Shadow Complex sold for $14.99 digitally, and $24.99 physically. "Even accounting for the cost of goods, the developer ends up getting about the same or more per unit than they would digitally," Fairhurst adds. "That works out phenomenally well with the smaller developers we work with because they might have games that haven't sold well digitally, but sell a bunch more of units through us."

The physical version of Breach & Clear on Vita made about four times the money as a physical release than it did on PlayStation Network.

Don't expect to see Limited Run's titles sold as new releases at big-box stores. You can only get them through the company's website, a set up that Bogart jokes has established them as the first "direct-to-consumer physical video game publisher." The reasoning for the exclusive release method is multifold, but is mostly because Limited Run's games do not having ESRB ratings on the boxes. Most big-box stores enforce ESRB requirements. Although all of the games Limited Run has released were rated by the ESRB for digital distribution, that rating cannot transfer to the physical product. That is a separate charge and process for publishers.

"There are two classes of ESRB ratings," Fairhurst clarifies. "There's the one for digital titles and a secondary class for physical products. Typically, publishers that are putting out physical releases have a ton of money – the big guys like EA and Activision – that have plenty of money to pay for that rating. They charge for those physical ratings, and there's a whole involved process with it too. It's kind of a ridiculous process to get a physical rating opposed to the digital one. The digital one is like an online quiz, but to get the physical one, you have to send some video footage, and an early version of the game. I feel like it would take a serious toll on our release schedule if we had to go through that."

Limited Run is finding great success, but is still just a studio of two people that want to create legacies for games. In the near future, the company is releasing Volume on Vita, Dragon Fantasy on PlayStation 4 and Vita, and One Way Heroics on PlayStation 4 and Vita. It's a healthy lineup that will likely sell out within hours of going on sale.

"We see some games that sell maybe one or two copies per week, and we're giving them a way to sell another 5,000 copies," Fairhurst concludes. "We want to bring these chances to all platforms." Right now, Sony is the only console manufacturer that is playing ball. Limited Run has had talks with Microsoft and Nintendo, but they didn't get far. Fairhurst speculates that these companies don't think 5,000 discs is worth their time. Whether they step up to the plate or not, gamers are flocking in thousands to the Limited Run's releases partially because the products are highly collectible, and partially to ensure that they can hopefully play these games decades from now when the digital versions are potentially gone.

Call Of Duty Gives Back

The Call of Duty Endowment uses the series' name recognition and players to help veterans find work

In 2007, Activision CEO Bobby Kotick visited the campus of the West Los Angeles Veterans' Affairs campus. There, he spoke with the Secretary of Veteran Affairs, Jim Nicholson, about installing a new performing arts center for the veterans. "Nicholson said, 'Bobby, vets don't need free art,'" Call of Duty Endowment executive director Dan Goldenberg recalls. "'They need jobs.'"

Inspired by that conversation, Kotick began the Call of Duty Endowment, a nonprofit that helps veterans find work in a variety of areas. "The ethos of Call of Duty comes from the military world," Goldenberg says. "So it seemed like a fitting place to give back."

Activision pays for all of the nonprofit's overhead and is its biggest donor, having given $21 million to date. Because of this, every dollar donated goes to the endowment's efforts. "We're one of the few charities who can say, '100 percent of donations received goes to the cause,'" Goldenberg says. "There's no overhead that a donor pays." In order to make the biggest impact with the money it receives, the endowment also funds other organizations that were already helping veterans find work instead of building its own.

The challenge was finding the right ones. According to Goldenberg, more than 40,000 nonprofits in the United States dedicate themselves to helping veterans, but few of them have met the endowment's standards. "While most of them are very well-intentioned, few of them are very well-run," he says.

Putting Together An A-Team

When Goldenberg came on board as the endowment's executive director in 2013, the nonprofit set two goals: Help 25,000 veterans find work by 2018, and find the best possible organizations to accomplish that goal.

To that end, the endowment partnered with auditing firm Deloitte to create a rigorous evaluation process. Ultimately, the company found 10 nonprofits it could trust, including Hire Heroes USA, Still Serving Veterans, and the Veteran Staffing Network. To date, they've given these organizations $18 million.

By finding the most impactful companies and focusing on expanding them, the endowment managed to hit its employment goal in 2016, two years ahead of schedule. Goldenberg attributes this partially to their narrow focus; the endowment only helps with job-counseling services, which helps them whittle down potential partner companies purely on the basis of their ability to help veterans find jobs.

Due to the relatively low number of organizations they support, they've been able to help all of them grow and reduce costs. "When we started our costs were probably about $2,800 per placement," Goldenberg says. "As we've helped these organizations get bigger, their costs go down." The endowment's current goal is place a total of 50,000 veterans in jobs by the end of 2019.

Getting Players Involved

Activision is the endowment's largest benefactor, but a significant sum of money comes from Call of Duty fans, as well. Among the downloadable content for Call of Duty: Black Ops III, Treyarch released the Call of Duty Endowment Warriors Personalization Pack and Valor Calling Card Set, which has earned $1.7 million for the Endowment.

Though the packs were originally Treyarch's idea, the endowment has a say in what goes into the actual content. "I'm involved every step of the way," Goldenberg says. "They consult us from the concept art all the way to the text. We want to be respectful and educational at the same time. We want to respect the history and tradition and authenticity of what we do so any military person will look at this and say, 'This is cool,' not, 'I'm offended by this' or 'They got it wrong.'"

The endowment also holds events like The Race to Prestige, a partnership with Twitch streamers and pro gamers to marathon Call of Duty games. "Last year, individual donations from viewers and gamers from Twitch were over $200,000," Goldenberg says.

With its initial goals already met and loftier ones on track, the Call of Duty Endowment is one of the best examples of video game companies and players giving back to some of the real-world people who've inspired some of the most popular games we play. Not bad for an idea that started as an arts center.

ANIMATION THROWDOWN

THE QUEST FOR CARDS

Download on the App Store

GET IT ON Google Play

Kongregate

(Coming Soon!)

Or download free at
kongregate.com/mobile-games

FOX

Scan this code and download the game!

World Of Warcraft: Legion

More than a decade after release, Blizzard refreshes the formula in all the right ways

World of Warcraft has undergone a multitude of changes over the last decade, adding options for finding groups, different difficulty modes, daily quests, garrison housing, and tons of new dungeons, raids, and zones. In many ways, Legion is a form of "WoW's greatest hits," drawing upon some of the most famous and impactful characters from the extensive lore, bringing back one of the great invasion threats, and morphing and refining with great success many of the systems that players have had issues with over the years.

Legion truly offers something for players of all types, from the ultra-casual who logs on once a week to the hardcore who puts in multiple hours each and every day, and it does so without making any sacrifices. Legion is the best expansion World of Warcraft has seen since the venerable days of The Burning Crusade and Wrath of the Lich King, making it worthy of notice for lapsed veterans or players looking to finally see what the MMORPG that made the genre mainstream is all about.

Legion immediately takes daily quests to task, one of the more contentious systems that became overbearing during the Mists of Pandaria expansion. Instead of being a laundry list of chores players feel compelled to do in order to progress, the daily quest system has been completely changed into something called world quests. World quests have taken a page out of Diablo III: Reaper of Souls' book and the adventure/bounty system, offering players the chance to wander the expansion zones seeking out gold, equipment, resources, or crafting materials. Instead of feeling forced into doing the same tasks over and over on a daily cooldown, these world quests populate with new opportunities every few hours, creating a constantly interesting and engaging board to scope out tasks of interest. Blizzard's borrowing from Diablo works astonishingly well here; I have never been so excited to pull up my map and plan out my next move.

Players receive an artifact weapon shortly after completing their initial specialization chain, a critical and flavorful piece of equipment that simultaneously adds another "talent tree" for players to explore, and which provides an additional advancement system that offers continual and measurable power long after the level cap of 110. These weapons are recognizable and legendary items from Warcraft history, including items like the Doomhammer, the shards of Frostmourne, and the Ashbringer. Players find relics instead of traditional weapon drops that they can slot in on these powerful items, and the issue of cosmetics is handled with an achievement system that allows for a multitude of styles and colors to keep things from getting stale. The artifact weapon system succeeds admirably by adding an additional "experience bar" that players can work on in the endgame.

The endgame is presented in a fashion that facilitates any kind of player, from solo to raider. Those who just want to play alone and keep progressing can hit up their world quests and collect emissary rewards. Of more interest to players like myself is the introduction of mythic+ dungeons that function somewhat like rifts in Diablo III. You can take a dedicated five-person group into challenging content and come away with rewards that are on par with raid loot. Raids will still exist for those looking for more traditional multi-group challenges, but for those like me who are looking for difficulty but don't want to play on a set schedule, five-person content is the sweet spot.

Legion is a massive undertaking that could end up suffering from a problem WoW has had for years: content drought between expansions. However, with the promise of Karazhan and an additional raid already on deck, Blizzard already has the best content addition in half a decade on their hands, and the potential to deliver even more. ◆

*Must pre-order/purchase using your PowerUp Rewards Card. NO PURCHASE NECESSARY TO ENTER OR WIN IN THE "GAMESTOP® POWERUP REWARDS™ GEARS OF WAR 4 SWEEPSTAKES". Open to legal residents of the 50 US & DC, 18 or older. Void where prohibited. Sweepstakes starts 10/1/16 and ends 10/31/16. For Official Rules, which govern, and details on how to enter without purchase or PowerUp Rewards account, visit www.poweruprewards.com. Sponsor: GameStop, Inc., 625 Westport Pkwy, Grapevine, TX 76051.

METAL GEAR SOLID V
THE PHANTOM PAIN
PowerUp Rewards Members
YOU COULD WIN
THE ULTIMATE METAL GEAR PRIZE PACK
3 WAYS TO ENTER*
1. Pre Order Metal Gear Solid V The Definitive Experience in-store or online for 2 entries**
2. Purchase Metal Gear Solid V in-store or online for 2 entries**
3. Use 200 points to enter at www.PowerUpRewards.com for 1 entry
FOR MORE DETAILS GO TO POWERUPREWARDS.COM
PC
PS4
XBOX ONE
KONAMI
M

*Must purchase using your PowerUp Rewards Card. NO PURCHASE NECESSARY TO ENTER OR WIN IN THE "GAMESTOP® POWERUP REWARDS™ METAL GEAR SOLID V SWEEPSTAKES". Open to legal residents of the 50 US & DC, 18 or older. Void where prohibited. Sweepstakes starts 10/1/16 and ends 10/31/16. For Official Rules, which govern, and details on how to enter without purchase or PowerUp Rewards account, visit www.poweruprewards.com. Sponsor: GameStop, Inc., 625 Westport Pkwy, Grapevine, TX 76051.

Where Sonic Went Wrong

Where Mario's biggest challenger took a wrong turn and how Sega hopes to fix it

In the late 1980s, Mario ruled the platforming genre. With the flourishing NES dominating the console market, it seemed as though no legitimate challenger could emerge to take on Nintendo's juggernaut. That all changed when Sonic the Hedgehog launched on the Sega Genesis. Sonic quickly rose to threaten Nintendo's mustachioed plumber as the face of the video game industry. Sonic was so popular that Sega's mascot – not Mario – became the first video game character to receive a float in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. At one point, Sonic was on a trajectory to be more recognizable than Mickey Mouse, according to former director of marketing at Sega Al Nilsen, who cites the mascot's Q-Rating at its peak.

The popularity of the Sonic the Hedgehog brand aided Sega in rising up to face Nintendo. "Sonic really helped demonstrate what the power of 16-bit was versus an 8-bit system," Nilsen says. "It was kind of a game changer. It was the first product that became a 'must-have' product and the product that drove Genesis hardware sales. It really got us noticed and helped us to go and build a strong base as Super NES was coming out."

Since the blue hedgehog's initial release 25 years ago, Sega's mascot has fallen from grace. Inconsistent quality and brand mismanagement have caused Sonic to go from a video game character that was as recognizable (if not more) as Mario to a character that is known more for his appearances in other media.

We spoke with several prominent people from Sonic's past to determine exactly what happened. Over the course of the discussions, several factors and potential tripping points arose. It's impossible to pinpoint one fall guy or a circumstance that stood apart as a cataclysmic event for the franchise; it was instead a confluence of events that led to Sonic's departure from the video game elite. Here's how Sonic took a wrong turn and how Sega hopes to get its Blue Blur back on course.

Factor 1: A Bungled Transition To 3D

Sonic had runaway success in the 2D realm, but with new consoles on the horizon the industry was heading toward a 3D future. The Genesis titles kept pace with Mario's biggest entries, but the true test of endurance would come in the mid '90s with the leap to 3D. Sega hoped to have a revolutionary Sonic title for the Sega Saturn when it launched in May 1995, but the game was stuck in development limbo.

Sonic X-treme was under development by Sega Technical Institute, a studio that worked on games like Sonic the Hedgehog 2. Unfortunately, much of the STI team that worked on Sonic's greatest hits had either departed Sega or was working on Sonic creator Yuji Naka's new IP, Nights Into Dreams.

While much of Sonic's core team was away from the franchise, word reached Naka that Sega had licensed his engine for the development of Sonic X-treme. He was unhappy with the decision and fought to disallow STI from using his engine.

Though this created a hurdle for the team, Christian Senn, one of the programmers on Sonic X-treme, saw far more problems with development than Naka's objection to them using his engine. "The target platform was changed many times, which involved a lot of redesign, technology changes, redeployment of code, and a number of other significant changes to and effects on the project, the team, and morale," he says. "Engineering leadership/staff changed a number of times, which involved code changes, or even starting from scratch each time."

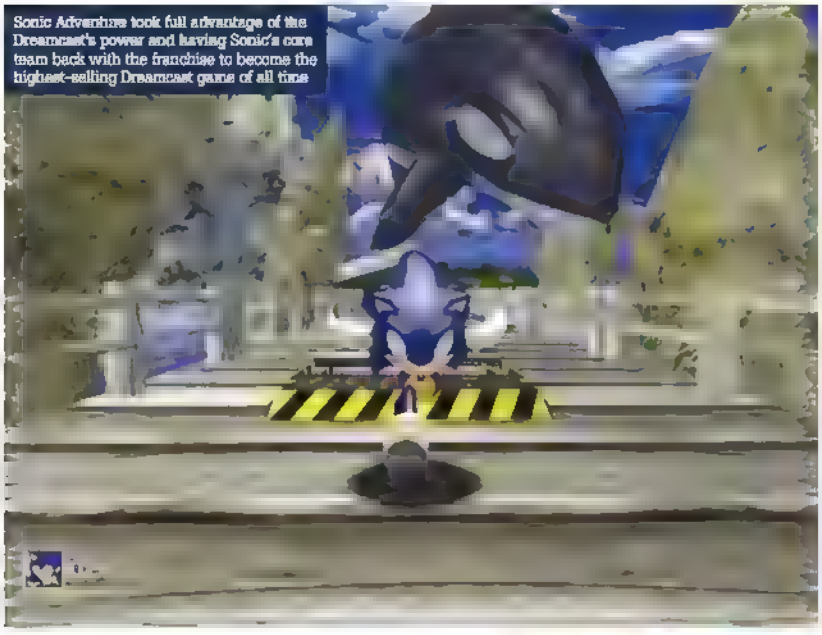
Senn says this rotating-door style of leadership caused the pressure to mount, as the lead of the project departed a year into development and the lead engineer and co-lead designer was demoted two years in.

Sega canceled the game, and the Saturn failed thanks in part to a lack of software in the face of more robust PlayStation and Nintendo 64 libraries. Firmly entrenched in third place, Sega and Sonic fell into the backs of gamers' minds. The future of the series was in doubt as rival platformers like Mario and Crash Bandicoot thrived in the new 3D space.

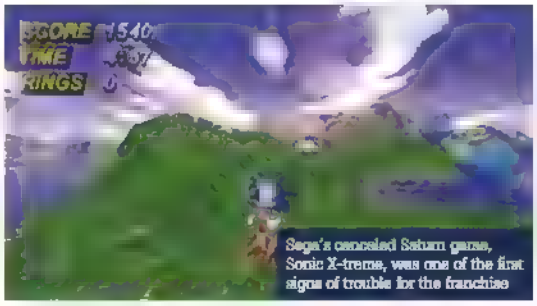
Sega had turned to a less experienced studio during a pivotal moment in the series' history, and the gamble did not pay off. The failure of Sonic X-treme meant that the series missed its chance to become a leader in 3D gaming as it had in 2D platforming. This proved to be a major setback, and Sonic was left playing catch-up.

In 1999, the Sega Dreamcast launched alongside Sonic Adventure. This represented the first time the series was presented in full 3D, which brought even more challenges thanks to Sonic's speed. Series producer and current head of Sonic Team Takashi Iizuka says that while they could recycle many of the assets in a sprite-based title like the Sonic games on Genesis, 3D environments don't allow for that. "Sonic's a really fast character, so we spent all this time making this huge, long, elaborate map, and then we'd run through it in like 10 or 15 seconds," he says.

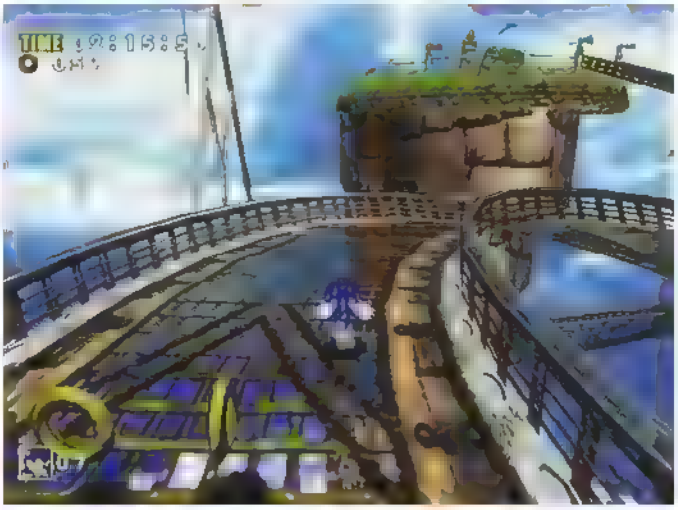
The way Sonic Team worked around this was to have six distinct characters featured, each with his or her own storyline. The game was a success, garnering high praise from critics and fans, and becoming the highest-selling Dreamcast game of all time. However, the success was short-lived thanks to Sega's troubles establishing the Dreamcast. This raised new issues for the franchise.

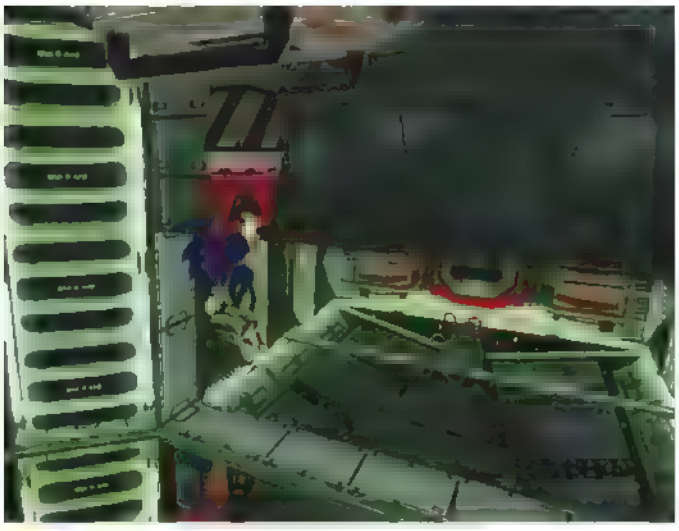


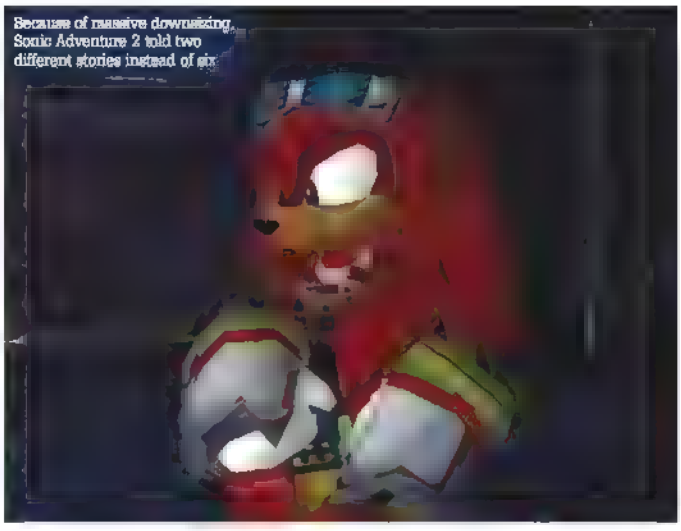
Sonic Adventure took full advantage of the Dreamcast's power and having Sonic's core team back with the franchise to become the highest-selling Dreamcast game of all time



Sega's canceled Saturn game, Sonic X-treme, was one of the first signs of trouble for the franchise







Because of massive downsizing, Sonic Adventure 2 told two different stories instead of six

Factor 2: Harsh Business Realities

With the PlayStation 2 on the horizon and the Dreamcast failing to meet Sega's goals, Sega knew its system was in trouble. While Sonic Team began development of Sonic Adventure 2, the project scope was dramatically altered due to staff downsizing. "Our team of 120 got pared down to 11, sent to America, and told to go make Sonic Adventure 2," Iizuka says. "Part of what we had to resolve was 'How are we going to make the same game with 11 people when we have less than a tenth of the staff on-board?' I was really tasked with trying to make the impossible possible."

A move like that after the release of a well-received game is one of a company in tumult. Handcuffing a flagship franchise in that manner hinted at bigger changes. Despite this, Sonic Team overcame the hurdles to deliver a critically acclaimed release with Sonic Adventure 2. The developers coped with the change in team size by telling two stories rather than six, shifting to feature two teams of characters rather than one story for each featured character.

However, internal strife at Sega combined with a lack of third-party support from publishers like EA and Squaresoft, as well as the impending launch of Sony's console to kill Sega's system just before the release of Sonic Adventure 2. In 2001, Sega announced it would abandon hardware manufacturing in favor of third-party publishing. The restructuring led to about a third of its Tokyo-based workforce being laid off, leading to a massive transitional period for the company.

As a first-party developer, the team behind the Sonic franchise enjoyed the benefits of working closely with the hardware team to get the most out of the system. This collaboration led to such innovations as the lock-on technology with Sonic & Knuckles on Genesis, and the Visual Memory Unit for the Dreamcast. With the Dreamcast's discontinuation and Sega's decision to restructure as a multiplatform third-party developer, the luxury Sonic Team had enjoyed since its inception disappeared.

"That was the biggest hit to not only my team, but a lot of the software development teams, where we no longer have the ability to control what we need to make our games," Iizuka says.

Factor 3: Struggling Creative Vision

Following its transition to third-party, Sega and Sonic Team began experimenting with different gameplay mechanics amidst a developer carousel, as leadership changes continued and the franchise struggled to find solid footing. Time and again, we saw Sega deviate from the Sonic formula to inconsistent results.

From Shadow the Hedgehog, where players control a gun-wielding Shadow as he blasts away aliens and rides a motorcycle, to the motion-controlled Sonic and the Secret Rings, Sega's stable of developers struggled to nail down a consistent formula for the series.

With Sonic Unleashed, the speedy heart of the franchise was alive and well with the blisteringly fast (and well-received) day stages, but as the sun set and night descended, the blue hedgehog became a brute werehog and the game became a slow-moving beat-em-up for half of the stages.

As developers continued to try different formulas with the series, fans' tolerance of the gimmicks began to wear thin. "I'm not sure if always trying something new is a good thing or a bad thing," Iizuka says. "Maybe it's kind of both sometimes."

The series began attracting more ire from its fan base, including a meme known as the Sonic Cycle (see sidebar on page 27). As Sega plotted the next path for Sonic in 2014, it revealed dramatic character redesigns for Sonic Boom. Fans adamantly railed against the redesigns of the characters, mocking Sonic's new scarves and Knuckles' overuse of athletic tape.

When asked his thoughts about the character redesigns for Sonic Boom, Iizuka, who was not involved with Sonic Boom's development, laughs and puts his face in his hands. "There were a lot of heated discussions and passionate debate between 'This is what we want to do' and 'This isn't right' and trying to make sure that Sega of America had this idea of what they wanted to do," he says.

"It wasn't good for the fans because when it did come out, a lot of people were upset with the Sonic experience that they got from Sonic Boom," Iizuka says. "Not being able to have that voice and say those things from where I was in relation to where development and where the idea was going was what my biggest regret was from what I heard from the fans and what I felt after seeing the game."

Factor 4: Quantity Over Quality

From Mario Kart to Super Smash Bros., Nintendo's mascot has made his presence known across myriad genres beyond his platforming pedigree. Similarly, Sega has pushed Sonic into other genres like kart racing, sports, and even fighting.

Unfortunately for Sega, many of Sonic's spin-offs have been poorly met, potentially diminishing the impact of the brand. Series like Sonic Dash on mobile devices, Sonic Spinball on Genesis, and Sega & Sonic All-Stars Racing have given fans strong games, but the ratio of well-received spin-offs to poorly received ones is not in Sega's favor.

In addition to spin-offs, Sega stubbornly clung to stringent deadlines despite quality concerns with several Sonic titles. Aggressive deadlines caused Sonic the Hedgehog 3 to ultimately split into two games (Sonic the Hedgehog 3 and Sonic & Knuckles). Sonic the Hedgehog 2006 became notorious for its lack of polish due to Sega's aggressive push for it to release in the holiday season.

The 2006 Debacle

With the new console generation beginning in the mid-2000s, development began on a game simply called Sonic the Hedgehog for PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360. The name was chosen to mark the series' return to its roots and to celebrate the franchise's 15th anniversary, but the end result is widely considered the lowest point of the series.

Going in, series creator Yuji Naka wanted to mimic the success comic book movies were experiencing with titles like *Batman Begins* and *Spider-Man 2*. "When Marvel or DC Comics turn their characters into films, they are thinking of them as blockbusters, huge hits, and that's what we were trying to emulate with Sonic 2006," he says. "These movies reach a massive audience, way further than just the original fans of the comic."

While the team's effort on production values is evident in Sonic 2006's beautiful cutscenes, the rest of the game crumbled under the weight of tight deadlines and leadership changes. Sega pressured Sonic Team to release the title in the holiday 2006 window. In order to satisfy that ambition, the game suffered greatly.

"It was the first iteration of the engine and we didn't have any time to polish and we were just churning out content as quick as we could," says series producer and Sonic Team head Takashi Iizuka.

Midway through development, it's reported that Sonic Team was split so that one team would work on Sonic the Hedgehog for PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360, while the other would begin work on Sonic and the Secret Rings for Nintendo's upcoming Wii console. In addition, in spring 2006, Naka left Sega to found his own studio. The game-changing team lost the development of one of the most pivotal entries in the series.

The team that initially made Sonic so great – Naka, designer/director Naoto Oshima, producer Mark Gerny, and others – was gone. "They lost the heart and soul of Sonic for a while, and I think that made an enormous, immediate difference in the next products that came out," former Sega of America CEO Tom Kalinske says. "It's hard to replicate that team."

Despite this fragmentation and turnover, Iizuka asserts that the real problem with Sonic 2006 was the deadlines. "We missed out on that really important time to polish and tune and manipulate the map and make sure that the world really felt good and the gameplay felt good," he says. "Because I didn't have that, it didn't turn out as good as the development team wanted."

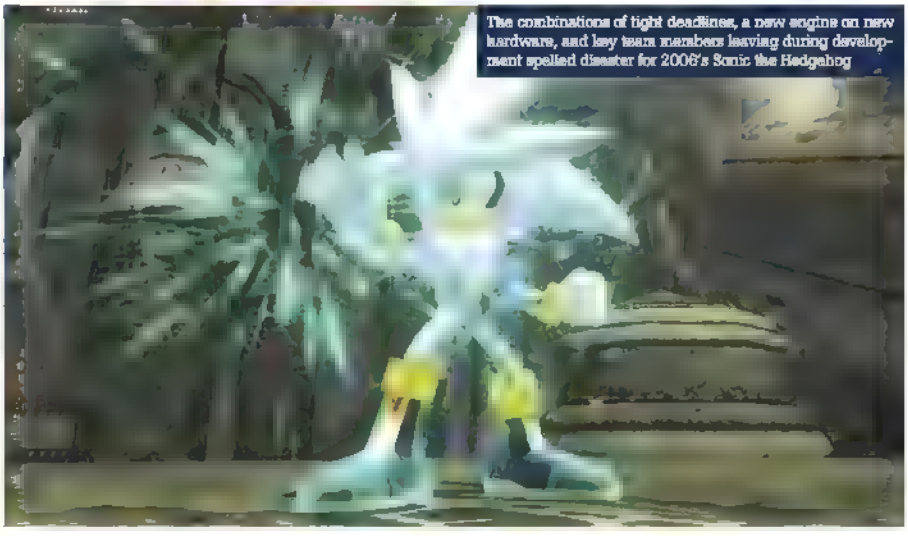
The lack of polish is evident. Sonic 2006 is full of visual and audio glitches, environmental clipping, and lagging gameplay. The title has become synonymous with the struggles the Sonic the Hedgehog franchise had faced in recent years. Sonic 2006 was meant to be a return to the series' roots, but it ended up damaging the franchise in the eyes of many. The series had taken obvious steps away from what made it great in the first place.

The Sonic Boom games were developed by Big Red Button and Sanzaru Games, so head of Sonic Team Takashi Iizuka felt unable to adequately voice his concerns

The Sonic Cycle

The inconsistent quality of recent titles led disappointed fans to coin the term "The Sonic Cycle" in 2008 to describe the cycle of hope and eventual disappointment they feel with each passing Sonic entry. The Sonic Cycle consists of three stages. The first stage is the announcement, which fans praise as the "triumphant return" of the glory days. The second stage occurs when Sonic's buddy characters pop up and the gameplay gimmicks start to appear. The third and final stage is when the game releases to poor reviews and a disappointed fanbase before the cycle begins anew with the next game's announcement.

Sonic Heroes experimented with the formula by having players control three characters at a time with different formations



The combinations of tight deadlines, a new engine on new hardware, and key team members leaving during development spelled disaster for 2006's Sonic the Hedgehog

Sonic Mania looks and feels just like a classic Sonic game from the Genesis era

Iizuka recalls the development cycle of Sonic Heroes, the first multiplatform mainline Sonic console game, as the most stressful of his career, in part thanks to deadlines. He was based in the United States while the rest of the development team was in Japan, and mismanagement took its toll on the team. "The level design for Sonic Heroes was made by two people: me and one other person," he says. "As we got to the later stages of development, this other person got pretty sick and didn't show up to work, so level design was made by one person! So for those very last stages of the game, I didn't sleep at all and I was constantly working. I lost about [22 pounds] because I was just cranking away and it was just work, work, work. I didn't sleep because I had to finish the game on my own. Almost dying!"

Restoring The Faith

After a run of poorly reviewed Sonic games that achieved equally poor sales, Sega finally reexamined its approach. As part of a 2015 restructuring, Sega took a long look at the franchise and discussed how it could improve its standing with fans.

With the restructuring, Sega and Sonic Team moved away from deadline-driven development and began emphasizing the quality of the titles. The first Sonic game to see this in action was Sonic Boom: Fire & Ice for 3DS, which was delayed a full year in order to make it a better game – something that rarely happened with past titles. The decision paid off as Fire & Ice is markedly better than either of the two previous Sonic Boom games (see page 90).

Sega relocated Iizuka and much of Sonic Team to Burbank, Calif., and brought in a new team to manage the Sonic brand. "We were very clear that if we were coming in, we were going to change things because continuing down that path was not an option for any of us," says Ivo Gerscovich, newly appointed chief brand officer of the Sonic the Hedgehog franchise.

Earlier this year, Sega unveiled Sonic Mania, an effort from indie developers PagodaWest, Headcannon, and Christian Whitehead. The title returns to the series' roots, striving to look and play like the classic 2D games from the early '90s. In our time with Sonic Mania, it feels just like the classic titles that made the series so iconic in the first place – a huge step in the right direction.

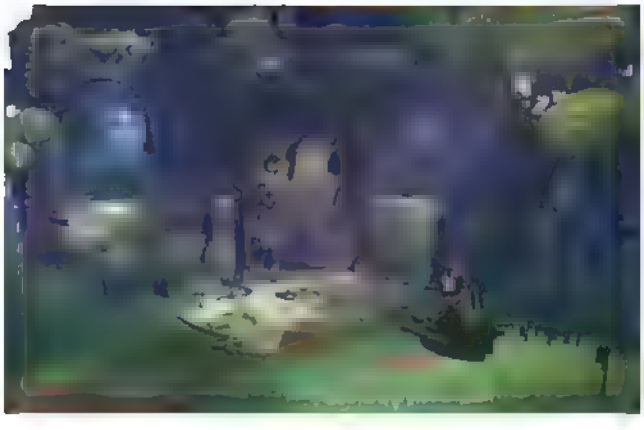
In addition, Sega announced Sonic Team's next game – codenamed Project 2017 – with very few details, but the inclusion of both Modern and Classic Sonic led fans to speculate that it has something to do with Sonic Generations, one of the better-received Sonic titles of the past 15 years.

Sega and Sonic Team appear to be listening to fans, and may finally have the corporate backing to strive for quality instead of pushing an unpolished game out the door. Now all we can do is wait while Sega tries to salvage the fate of its once-great mascot.

"I think there is some natural up and down for any character," former Sega of America CEO Tom Kalinske says. "We've certainly seen it with the Marvel characters over the years. We've seen it with Barbie. We've seen it with Star Wars. We've seen it with G.I. Joe and Hot Wheels. All of these brands have had their cycles. I think Sonic has had a downward cycle for a while, and it's time to have an upward cycle again for a while."

The Games Of PAX West 2016

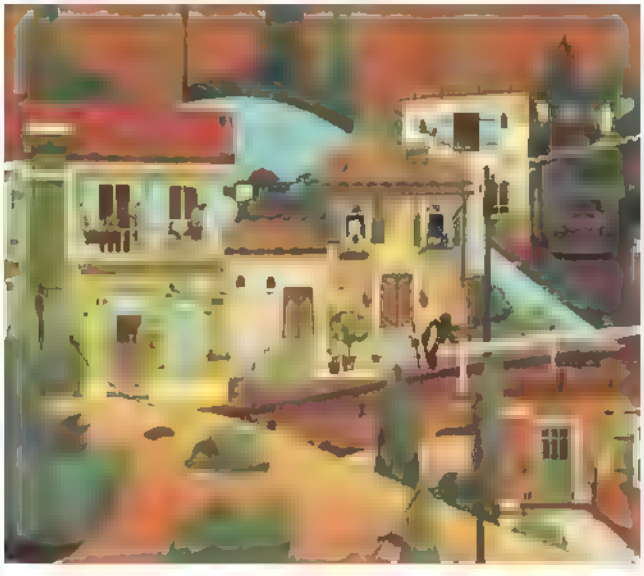
The original PAX show began as a place for fans to gather together and celebrate the hobbies they love, but in recent years it's also become a giant showcase for indie games. We scoured this year's show, and picked out six of the most promising titles from attending developers.



Hob is an exciting, Zelda-like action game we spent a half-hour with during our roaming of the PAX floor. The game comes from Runic Games, the developer behind the Torchlight series, and the company's trademark colorful aesthetic is on show in its latest offering. In Hob, you play an adventurer dropped into a mysterious world that can be reconfigured, with pieces of land and fragments of structures shifting around in place like puzzle pieces whenever you find a switch that corresponds to the giant gauntlet your character is wearing. Combat is fun and the world is lush and ripe for exploration. We're curious to see where the minimalistic story leads. Hob is out in 2017 for PC.

The Church In The Darkness presents a fascinating premise: You are an agent infiltrating a religious cult called The Collective Justice Mission in South America. Your mission is to find a relative and bring them home in one piece and possibly stop the cult. The Church In The Darkness takes a procedural-generation approach to storytelling, with the motives and alignment of the cult changing with each playthrough. Is The Collective Justice Mission evil? Or are you harming farmers who are just trying to protect what's theirs? The demo's stealth mechanics were enjoyable, focusing on sneaking past guards, and throwing rocks to distract them while making your way to a government contact who has useful information. The promise of the game shined through this brief snippet and will hopefully be the case for the full game when it releases in 2017 on PS4, Xbox One, and PC.

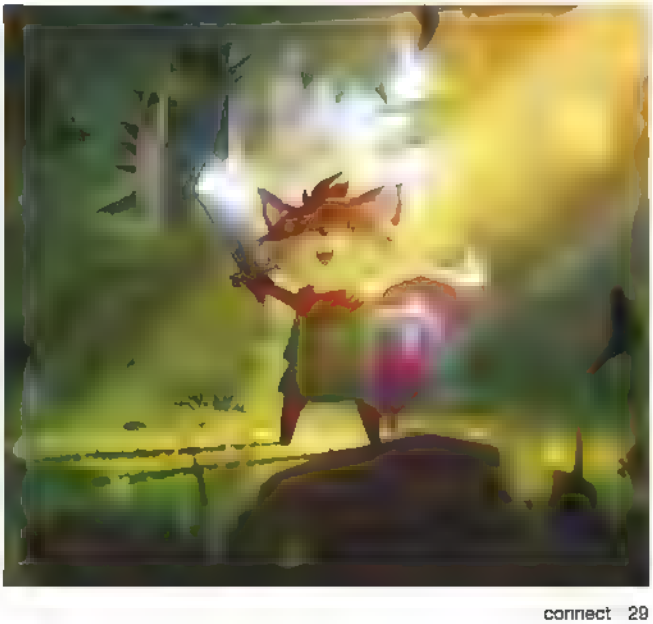
Old Man's Journey is a colorful upcoming mobile puzzler that follows the adventure of an older gentleman as he backpacks through a lovely country by the sea. You have to manipulate hills, platforms, and other devices on the touchscreen to help him navigate the terrain. This is trickier than it sounds, with later puzzles in the demo we played proving to be particularly difficult. During our time with the demo, we manipulated switches to position drawbridges across waterfalls and poked a sail boat across a lake to guide our protagonist to safety. The reward for solving these puzzles were beautiful cutscenes that showcased memories from the man's past, including his wedding day. Developer brokenrules says it hopes to tell a story of "life, loss, and hope." Players will be able to experience that tale for themselves when Old Man's Journey hits iOS in 2017.



Trion Worlds' **Atlas Reactor** is a unique beast, combining the team-based gameplay that's so prevalent on multiplayer online battle arenas and the tactical intricacies of games like XCOM. The real slam dunk is that the game doesn't collapse due to waiting around for turns to happen, as turns are locked in and all characters take their actions simultaneously, making matches as fast as anything else out there, but with additional strategic depth. Whether you're playing with a group of friends or on your own, there are tons of characters and play styles to discover as you master the mechanics. Atlas Reactor launches this fall on PC, with plenty of cosmetics and unlockable fare to work toward game after game.

Raw Fury Games' **Gonner** taps into the power of the 2D platformer with hordes of enemies in procedurally generated landscapes and levels, each leading to tough bosses and challenges. There's a ton of secrets to find as you attempt to keep your head, literally – your powers are tied to different heads that you can unlock in a sort of progression system as you attempt to push through the difficult world. The protagonist Ikk can uncover multiple endings as he traverses deadly environments, always searching for just the right combination of heads and skill to tackle the unwavering platforming, which almost feels like a bullet-hell at times as the screen becomes swarmed with lethal objects. While it's one death and you're back to square one, Gonner has things like additional heads and guns to unlock that should help make your next attempt slightly easier. Look for Gonner on PC this fall.

Andrew Shouldice's **Secret Legend** is a beautiful little indie gem, taking its cues from The Legend of Zelda and Dark Souls. With fluid animations and a breathtaking world for a cute intrepid fox protagonist to explore, there are, not surprisingly, many secrets to be unearthed. Treasures, things to smash, things to slash, and dangerous enemies lurk around every turn, but the atmosphere and environments are quite stunning to behold, a true accomplishment even at this early stage for a solo designer. Secret Legend is scheduled to hit PC next year.



Name:
Marinko Milosevski
Twitter:
@marinko_art
Website:
marinkoillustration.com
Occupation:
Graphic Designer for Rockstar Games
Location:
Brooklyn, NY

The Accidental Artist

Marinko Milosevski grew up playing Zelda and Mario games in a suburb of Detroit, and his love for drawing those characters eventually helped him land a job at Rockstar Games. However, you're probably more familiar with Milosevski's side job, creating stunning screen prints featuring popular video games like Metal Gear Solid, Shadow of the Colossus, and Super Smash Bros. We talked with Milosevski about what inspired his unique style and how he stumbled into selling his posters.

Interview by Ben Reeves

When did you first start drawing video game posters?
I went to school for illustration, so it was a lot of, "This is how you paint. This is how you draw." A lot of it was going over my head, and I couldn't really see myself doing it – like painting some dude sitting in a chair for the rest of my life. However, around that time I started seeing a lot of those Mondo posters where they take classic movies and TV shows and recreate new limited edition screen print posters. A big thing with screen printing is you can only print so many colors, which creates this cool visual style, so I saw that, and I was like, "That's what I want to do!" I thought it would be awesome if they had some of those for video games. Then, when I was a senior, we had a class where you could just do whatever you wanted. I did a series of three Zelda posters and the Super Metroid one, and it kind of just took off from there

Then you started selling them?
I wasn't originally planning on selling them, but one of my friends posted them on her Tumblr and it kind of blew up. People were asking to buy them, so I really quickly put together an online store.

What made you want to be an artist?
I had books with all the Pokémon in them, so I would try to copy those over. Drawing was something I always did

When it came time to go to school, I actually applied to [the College for Creative Studies in Detroit] and they rejected me, so I was planning on just going to some other university. However, the school was still sending me emails, so I asked them to take me off that list, and whoever was sending those emails replied and asked me to send him copies of my work. I guess they changed their mind because I got into the school. Looking back, I had no idea what I was getting into. It was all very unplanned, and completely out of my control. [Similar to] the posters.

We've heard you've done really well selling these at conventions like New York Comic Con and C2E3 in Chicago. How has that been?
Yeah, my friend's girlfriend did cosplay, and she saw my work and said I should get a table at a convention, because I would probably do pretty well. It was one of the cheapest conventions too, like the table is only $150, but I was like, "I don't know if this is worth all the trouble." But then I did it, and completely underestimated everything. People were flipping out, and I had lines forming at my booth.

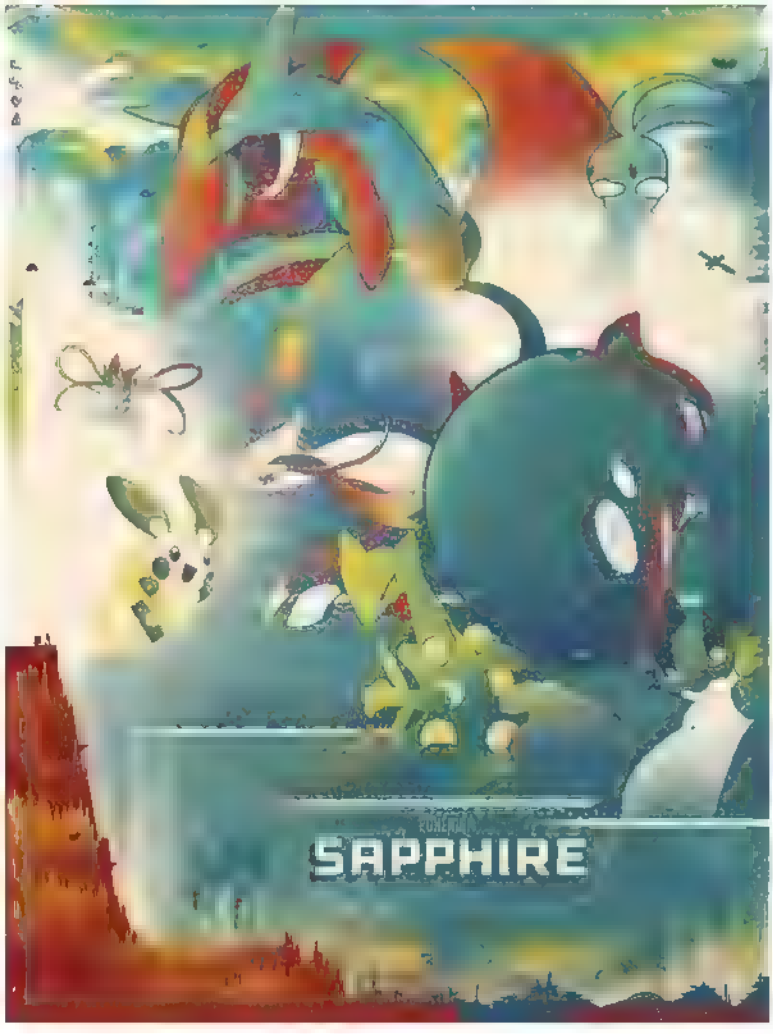
So it was worth it?
Yeah, I probably made eight or nine grand last year at that show. I might've made a little less that first year because I didn't know how much paper to bring. I had ordered two rolls of paper thinking I would never run out, because that's like 120 posters. It's funny, I was out of everything by Friday, and I knew that Saturday was just going to be the busiest day of the convention. So, I was running around trying to buy smaller ink cartridges and trying to get the ink out with a needle and put it back into the big ink cartridges that my printer would take. I was at Rite Aid and CVS on Halloween asking for needles, and I think the pharmacist was pretty freaked out, but it ended up working. I don't know how, because it was the most jerry-rigged system.

What's the best response you've heard from people at shows?
I've had some people who are like, "I don't even know what this game is. I just really like it." Usually it'll be like a boyfriend or girlfriend or a dad at a convention. Sometimes little kids walk by and freak out over the Pokémon ones, and parents are like, "Oh well, they like them, and they look cool, so I wouldn't mind having them up at my house."

How long does it take to make one of these posters?
It usually ranges. The simpler ones like the Zelda and Star Fox posters I've done took longer to think of the concept as opposed to actually make them, which probably took around a few nights of work. The more complicated ones like the Pokémon ones typically take at least two weeks, and I usually end up drawing and doing a lot more than actually goes into the finished posters.

Have you ever had any legal problems with Nintendo or anybody else contacting you and telling you that you can't sell merchandise featuring their characters?
I haven't. A lot of people ask me that, but nobody's ever told me not to sell these, so that's kind of the way I've been doing it. If they tell me not to do one, I'll take them down. They've been around for so long now that I assume somebody [at Nintendo] would've seen them. From what I've read, it seems like it's technically fan art, but I like to think they're not doing anything similar, so it's okay. I think the work is pretty good, so at the very least they're not offended.

What are you working on next?
I did finally play Final Fantasy VII, because that's a big one that people always ask about. And I'm doing one for Luigi's Mansion because I had this idea to do it for like two years and I've just never gotten around to it.



SPACE COWBOY

Nathan Fillion talks Destiny, Halo, and his passion for gaming

Nathan Fillion is best known for his work on beloved TV shows such as *Castle* and *Firefly*, but he's also voiced some memorable characters in gaming, such as Halo's Buck and Destiny's Cayde-6. Fillion is an avid fan of video games, especially the FPS genre. We recently chatted with him about how he got into games, if he'd ever want to play Nathan Drake, and his favorite games of all time.

What's your history with video games?
I didn't have a game console when I was a kid. Kevin next door had ColecoVision and an Intellivision. He also had a Vectrex – this was a little mini stand-up video game [system], which was quite amazing. I would trade him stacks of comics to borrow his Vectrex. I only had a Telestar, which was a little [system] that would connect to your TV and you could play Pong on it.

So when I was growing up and PlayStation came out, that was so advanced that I couldn't even imagine what was going on with games at that point. Then the Xbox came out, and when I went out and got it, the following day I had a hernia surgery, so I was down for a couple of weeks. I remember there were a few games that I really wanted that I sought after. I was like, "Give me that one, that one, and that one, and why don't you throw in this Halo one?" I didn't even know what it was. I just saw a guy with armor and a chief with a gun on the back and thought, "That looks alright." It changed everything. That game was the be-all and end-all of gaming for me.

I was public about loving that game so much, so when they came out with the second installation Bungie gave me a ring and asked me if I wanted to do a couple of lines in the game. I think we called my character Sergeant Reynolds. I had a few lines and people went squirrely and had a great time with it. [Bungie] called me up later and said they wanted to do something bigger and invented the Sergeant Buck character. Now Sergeant Buck has become a Spartan. I love that [series]. To be a part of it – amazing, so much fun.

You voiced Cayde-6 in Destiny, which became a popular character in The Taken King. Can you talk about injecting humor into the franchise and how the recording style was different for The Taken King?
I think [Bungie] had a great game, but they were looking at it in a way that – and this is just my opinion – as "We're off to a great start, it can get a lot better from here." So with that colossal update they did, they were able to say, "Here's a great place where this story can go."

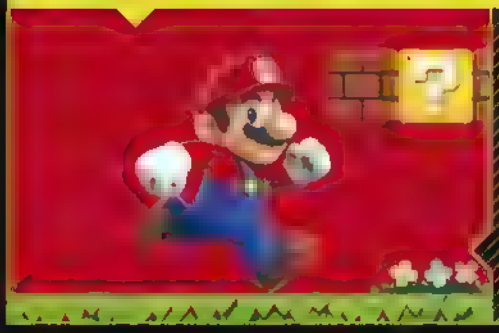
Gamers now are far pickier about their entertainment. You have to be entertained. You have to know why you're infiltrating this enemy spaceship to get something back, why it's important, and how it plays into the drama of this war. Watching the story unfold becomes so much a part of playing the game, and it allows you to invest. I enjoy investing in the stories of the game, and I think Bungie's done a wonderful job on the story in Destiny…and of course I enjoy swooping in at the last minute, recording the voice work, and then taking all the credit.

Nolan North is one of your friends. Does he think you should play Nathan Drake in a movie adaptation of Uncharted?
Nolan and I are trying to pitch that I play the role and he voices it. I feel like I've got the look, but Nolan …that's Nathan Drake's voice. It's perfection, so I'd be disappointed to hear another voice.

What are your top five video games of all time?
I'm going to have to put Halo up there. I'm going to put Destiny on my list. I'm not as good at Destiny as I am at Halo, so it's not going to be as high. I loved Call of Duty: Ghosts. That was a really good game. I loved the missions that you had to run. Those were a lot of fun. A lot of the Call of Duty [games] I really enjoy. I played Batman: Arkham City; I really enjoyed that. And for the last one, I'm going to go way back in time to my Sega Dreamcast, it had a game called Toy Commander, where you played in various rooms of a house as little vehicles and you had to shoot other people driving around in little vehicles with crayons, then pencils, then pens. That was your upgraded weapons. I really got into that game.

Is there a video game you'd like to see adapted to the big screen so you could play the lead?
If we're dreaming then why don't we just make the Halo movie and I'll play Spartan Buck? I've got the helmet just so they know. If they're out there listening, that's just as much budget as we don't have to spend. I'm sure they're looking for a Nathan Fillion type, which means I probably wouldn't get it. That's just how the industry works.

The Good



NINTENDO is developing Super Mario Run – the plumber's debut iOS game. The exclusive title is an autorunner like Rayman Jungle Run, but still aims to capture the franchise's 2D platforming charm. The game is expected in December. Niantic and Nintendo also plan to release Pokémon Go for Apple Watch before the end of the year.

The Bad

FALLOUT 4 mods on the PS4 aren't happening, and according to developer Bethesda, it's all Sony's fault. "...While we have long been ready to offer mod support on PlayStation 4, Sony has informed us they will not approve user mods the way they should work: where users can do anything they want for either Fallout 4 or Skyrim Special Edition," reads a post on Bethesda's website. The statement also says the company hopes "to find other ways user mods can be available for our PlayStation audience," and says it still hopes Sony reconsiders.

The Ugly

VALVE removed Digital Homicide's games from Steam after the studio sued 100 customers for leaving bad reviews of its titles. Valve was blunt with its reasoning, saying, "Valve has stopped doing business with Digital Homicide for being hostile to Steam customers."

Quotable

"A delay is a difficult decision, particularly with this game, but we have encountered more bugs than anticipated while in the final stages of development."

– Sony president of worldwide studios **Shuhei Yoshida** explains the latest setback for The Last Guardian, now coming on December 6.

Tracking The Strange Trails Of The Adventure Game

How one of gaming's oldest genres defies definition and continues to reinvent itself

Genres usually have specific requirements. A shooter needs to have players firing projectile-based weapons at targets, even if the projectile is ink instead of bullets. Strategy games such as StarCraft and Fire Emblem require you to make tough calls and carefully manage valuable resources to defeat enemies. However, "adventure" is such a nebulous term and the evolution this particular genre has taken over the years only reinforces just how malleable it is. Once upon a time, an interactive adventure meant digging through your inventory for an item that would help you bypass a puzzle. Now, for many people, it means simulations that force them to make tough moral choices in life-and-death situations. From ancient quests in underground kingdoms to solving the disappearance of a child in a small town, we examine the genre's twisted and unique evolution. ***by Javy Gwaltney***

A HEARTWARMING GENESIS

The first real adventure game of note, Colossal Cave Adventure, sprung up as a way for programmer Will Crowther to connect with his daughters after his divorce. The text adventure casts players as someone exploring a cave in search of treasure. Crowther used a mapping of Kentucky's Mammoth Cave system and his own love of Dungeons & Dragons to create the game. With its focus on exploration and puzzle-solving, the game served as a template for influential adventure titles like Zork and King's Quest.

"Adventure games from the '80s and '90s were more puzzle-focused," says Ron Gilbert, a writer on classic adventure games like Monkey Island and Maniac Mansion. "It may seem like a small thing, but it has drastic ramifications for the design (and the audience)."

Gilbert and fellow adventure game writers like Tim Schafer came to prominence when the genre's bedrock was goofy humor and puzzles that had their own wacky logic to solving them. The times have changed, but Gilbert believes there's still a place in the world for this kind of adventure game. "Puzzle-based adventure games never died," he says. "They still sell the same number of copies today they sold in the '90s. The issue is they never grew with the rest of the industry."

He's not alone on that assertion. Dave Gilbert (no relation) has made his career as an indie developer working on modern point-and-click adventure titles like Shardlight and The Blackwell series. He's made his living creating games in this niche for nearly a decade. "It's funny, because you always hear that adventure games are dead or they're coming back," he says.

He finds the "resurgence of adventure games" narrative to be an interesting one because it doesn't happen to other genres. "You never hear that story about any other genre even though you take like [shoot 'em ups] or rogue-likes or platformers, and by like the same metric they've also died and come back," he says. "It's like people like that narrative: 'Oh, adventure games are coming back' or they're dead and 'This person is bringing them back.' It's never been true... adventure games have always been there."

While the main audience for interactive adventures seems to be geared toward narrative-driven games, that's not stopping either Gilbert from making classic adventure games. Ron is currently working on Thimbleweed Park (pictured), which embraces the pixelated aesthetic of Maniac Mansion as well as the tone of quirky '90s investigative dramas like *The X-Files* and *Twin Peaks*. "We want to show the world you can make a puzzle-based adventure game with compelling characters, narrative, and no stupid puzzles," he says.

Gamers will have to wait until Thimbleweed Park is released next year to see if Gilbert and company can meet his ambitions. However, he's right about one thing: Narrative-focused games have taken center stage for fans of the genre.

UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

First-person adventure games are nothing new, as both Myst and The Journeyman Project were '90s adventure games set in first-person. However, a new crop of titles like Amnesia: The Dark Descent are taking this subgenre in a radically different direction, forgoing combat and puzzle elements in favor of making world exploration and narrative the focal point.

Tacoma, the sophomore effort for the studio that created Gone Home, has a lot to live up to. Gone Home was one of the major titles of the past few years that helped shift the adventure genre away from traditionally gamey elements like puzzles to focus on telling an emotionally charged story in a mundane setting – a family's home in Portland, Oregon. Tacoma takes place in a much more fantastical setting – a space station – but still focuses on relationships between the people who live there. "I think [first-person adventure] games give you the ability to really dig into the details of these worlds," says Steve Gaynor, designer on Tacoma. "And in that way it often exposes things about the people who inhabit them in a very direct way."

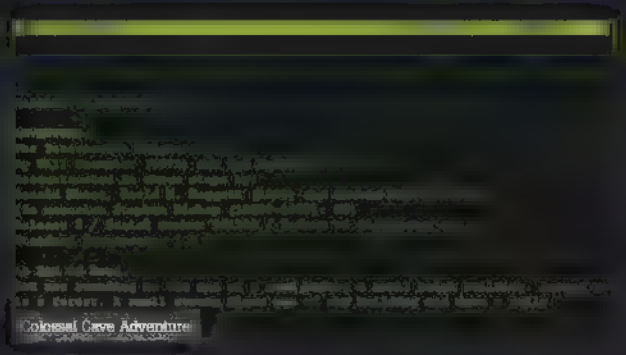
Nina Freeman, another designer for Tacoma and creator of Cibele, finds first-person games to contain a strong potential for instilling players with empathy. "They're really exciting in their potential to help players step outside of their own experience and consider things from a different point of a view," she says.

Virginia, another upcoming first-person adventure game, casts you as a graduate FBI student trying to track down a missing person in a small town in 1992. Like Thimbleweed Park, it draws inspiration from '90s television shows, but its take is much more serious and grounded in drama. Co-creator Jonathan Burroughs, who worked at EA before setting out to create Virginia, says those inspirations laid the groundwork for the game. "When we were meeting with frustration and getting mired by concepts which went nowhere, it was an enthusiasm for the characters and the atmosphere of '90s neo-noirs which set us on a path toward what would become Virginia," he says. "But Virginia quickly found its own identity and after building out our characters and the scenes they would inhabit, the story took on a life of its own."

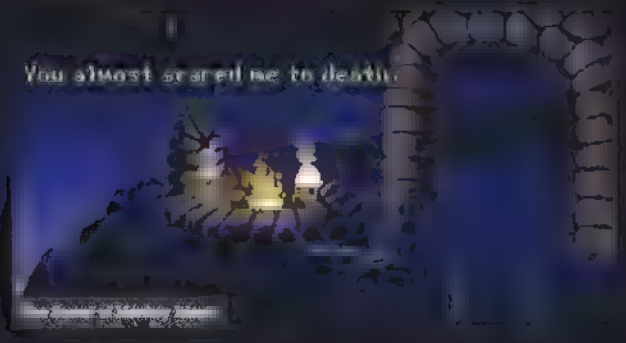
Like Gone Home before it, Virginia's first-person perspective makes its mundane settings, like an ordinary kitchen, fascinating to behold in a way that probably wouldn't be possible in third-person. In the brief demo I played, I wandered around the house of the missing child, searching through trash cans and beneath beds for any clues about where he might have gone, while also learning bits and pieces about who he and his family are by staring at records and posters.

Sean Vanaman, who worked on Firewatch, thinks this is one of the thrusts of why the first-person perspective adds a unique dimension to interactive storytelling. "You get away with so much more," he says. "You don't have persistence of control. In a third-person adventure game, all the discovery moments, all the plot moments are usually outside of your control and have to be made outside of the systems of player input."

Both Gone Home and Firewatch have the distinction of not only being critical successes but commercial ones as well, each earning their respective developers millions of dollars. Burroughs seems largely unconcerned with whether or not the game is that profitable and is more interested in "telling an original story," something he says the adventure genre excels at and why the genre, as many-faced as it is, continues to thrive decades after its inception. "I think the adventure game as I would define it is timeless, and the appetite for them is undiminished," he says. "Their diversity and creativity is broader than it has ever been."



Colossal Cave Adventure



History Lessons

Want to play some of the best adventure games over the years to get a sense of the genre's breadth? Here are five that capture the appeal of the genre.

Zork (1977): As far as text adventures go, they don't get much bigger than Zork. This fantasy adventure is incredibly influential thanks to its witty prose, dark humor, and focus on exploration. *(PC, iOS)*

A Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy (1984): This text adventure is based on Douglas Adams' popular sci-fi classic and is known for throwing ridiculously difficult puzzles at the player, as well as Adams' signature combination of oddball humor and profound observations. *(PC, iOS)*

The Secret of Monkey Island (1990): This famous point-and-click adventure game is renowned for its charming characters and difficult puzzles. LucasArts remade The Secret of Monkey Island in 2009 and it's a pretty solid upgrade of a fantastic game. *(PC, iOS, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360)*

Grim Fandango (1998): One of the last, truly great LucasArts adventure games. Manny Calavera's journey through the world of the undead is a vibrant, hysterical journey hiding a surprising amount of soul. *(PlayStation 4, PC)*

Soma (2015): Soma effectively communicates both dread and hope through its 10-hour journey through the end of the world. It's a nightmare of a game, but one worth experiencing until the credits roll. *(PlayStation 4, PC)*

Night in the Woods

SCHEDULED PROGRAMMING

Alongside the first-person narrative adventure boom, another kind of adventure game has cropped up that apes the conventions of television. The emergence of digital distribution platforms like Steam, PSN, and Xbox Live made episodic gaming a viable option, with adventure games finding yet another new format. Telltale Games popularized the release model, publishing episodes of games like Sam & Max Save the World and Back to the Future, usually concluding within the span of a year. The model has received scrutiny over how long developers take to release segmented content, but episodic content also draws a sizable audience due to the cheap price of admission and unintimidating time commitment.

As episodic gaming has become more popular, the more notable games have taken advantage of the format, billing games as series, with each episode often ending on a dramatic cliffhanger and trying to sell players on the promise that their choices will have a huge impact on how the story plays out. The Walking Dead and Life is Strange are notable examples, but smaller series of all genres like The Dream Machine and Blues and Bullets have started popping up in their wake, filling up digital stores.

With the formula being applied to giant properties like Batman and Game of Thrones while at the same time indie developers all over the world try their own hand at releasing adventure games bit by bit, this kind of episodic gaming shows no signs of slowing down.

WHAT LIES AHEAD

No genre is harder to break down and qualify than the adventure game. It is a thriving collection of games filled with diverse kinds of stories and experiences, and it only looks to get bigger with the likes of Last Life and Night in the Woods inbound in 2017. As the medium of video games continues to grow, it will be interesting to see if the adventure genre continues to spread out even further and change with the times, encapsulating a wider range of interactive experiences for gamers everywhere.

Politicians

President John Henry E[illegible]

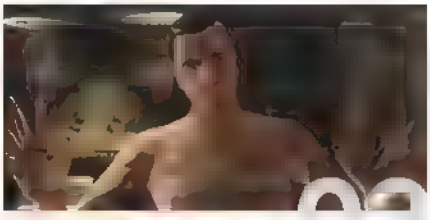
Fallout 3

Even the post-apocalyptic remnants of the U.S. needs a president – or in Eden's case, an amalgamation of every president that preceded him. Unfortunately, the self-aware A.I. in charge of the wasteland ends up being as trustworthy as you'd expect a patriotic supercomputer to be.

Mike Haggar

Final Fight

Many politicians claim to be tough on crime, but Metro City mayor Mike Haggar is willing to roll up his sleeves and clean up the streets himself. Just kidding – Haggar doesn't do shirts. After suplexing his way through the Mad Gear gang, Haggar even became Mayor of Earth in MvC 3.



Thomas Stubbs III

GTA IV: The Lost And The Damned

It's hard to find an honest politician, but Congressman Stubbs bares it all to protagonist Johnny Klebitz (and boy do we mean "all") in their memorable first meeting. The illicit endeavors that follow may include blackmail, murder, and mayhem, but Stubbs remains a loyal ally to the end.

Jonathon Irons

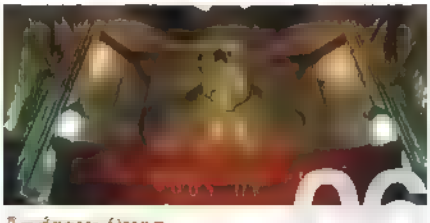
Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare

Irons may only be the new guy on the United Nations Security Council, but as the owner of the world's largest private military, he has plenty of political power. Sure, the crazed billionaire is hell-bent on bringing down all the world's governments – but he can give one hell of a speech.

Bill Clinton

NBA Jam: Tournament Edition

Usually someone yelling that the president's on fire would be a bad thing. For ex-President Bill Clinton, however, it just meant he was on a wicked scoring streak. Clinton's secret appearance in NBA Jam kicked off a series of weird and zany video game cameos for politicians.



Andrew Ryan

He may not have been elected to the position, but Andrew Ryan is definitely the man in charge of Rapture, and his Ayn Rand-inspired rhetoric is undeniably political. Ryan's choices end up making Rapture an underwater dystopia, but they also make him an unforgettable character.

Senator Steven Armstrong

Metal Gear Solid: Revengeance

The cigar-chomping senator from Colorado might be a nanomachine-infused nightmare for Raiden, but his goal to end war as a business is noble. His plan to purge America of the weak? Less noble. The ensuing boss fight is as crazy and over-the-top as Armstrong himself.

President Adam [illegible]

Benford might just be gaming's most altruistic president. Unfortunately, his plan to publicly acknowledge the Raccoon City incident and expose Umbrella's bio-weapons research earned him a one-way ticket to Zombietown. Not that he'd be America's first braindead president...

Space Marine [illegible]

Michael Ford needs all the help he can get to overthrow our alien overlords, but absolutely no one expected his reinforcements to include a space armor-clad George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. The crazy reveal of our futuristic forefathers makes us wish we got a Conduit 3.

President Michael Wilson

After being betrayed by vice president and former brother-in-arms Richard Hawk, it's up to President Wilson to take back America one city at a time. Thankfully, his Metal Wolf mech suit is loaded with minigUns, missiles, and more. Now that's change you can believe in!

LEVELUP®

GET GEARED UP!

GAMING CHAIR ACTION AND GAMING GEAR STORAGE!

ROCKER GAMING CHAIRS

GAME GEAR STORAGE TOWERS

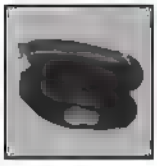
RED CURVE ROCKER GAMING CHAIR

Bluetooth

- Express 2.0 speaker system
- Bluetooth™ wireless
- Plug-in adaptor
- Side control panel with power/volume dial, input/output and headphone jacks
- Pocket on back for cord management

$99.99 Item#: GC-006EXBXRD

Express 2.0 Speaker System



Folds for easy storage

Control Panel with Bluetooth

BLUE STRIPE ROCKER GAMING CHAIR

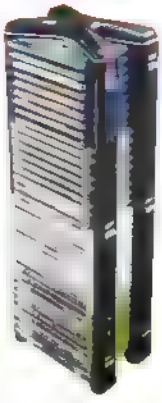
- Blue racing stripe on black fabric
- Ideal for ages 6 an up
- Folds for easy storage

$59.99 Item#: GS-BF16R-B

Folds for easy storage

Rocker Action

STEALTH MEDIA STORAGE TOWER



- Universal storage for 36 Games, Blu-ray™ discs and DVDs
- Stores Playstation®4, Playstation®3, XBOX ONE®, XBOX 360®, Wii™ and WiiU™ games.

$19.99 Item#: 225038-24-00

Mounts to the wall (includes hardware and template

Stacks Horizontally

Stacks Vertically

RT CONTROLLER TOWER/HEADSET HOLDER

- Universal storage for Game Controllers and 36 Games, Blu-ray™ discs, DVDs and 1 headset
- Stores Playstation®4/3, XBOX ONE®/360®, Wii™/Wii U™ controllers and games.

$29.99 Item#: 225144-20-00

Holds 2 PlayStation® 4 or PlayStation® 3 Controllers

Holds 2 XBOX or 2 Wii U™ Pro Controllers or 4 Wii™ Remote and 2 Nunchuk™

Creative Quarterbacking

Rex Dickson is one of the faces of the Madden franchise, but it's far from the only video game he's led. Dickson has traveled the globe to follow his calling as a developer, from his start on the first Turok to his work with Homefront for THQ as well as two stints at EA (including the 2010 reboot of Medal of Honor). Dickson shares what he's learned from his time in development and by interacting with the vocal Madden community.

You've made games across different genres, so what design principles carry over no matter what kind of game you're working on? And what kind of things are unique to sports games?

One thing that does carry over is identifying and smoothing frustration points. That is no different depending on what game you work on. It's those little sort of bits and pieces that jar you out of the experience or just make you feel like the game didn't do what you expected it to do. Now, in terms of unique elements to sports games, what really surprised me about Madden specifically is splash damage. So in an FPS, if I have a bug on every three that's happening at the tower scene, in a specific moment, that bug is isolated to that exact moment.

Now, in Madden, you can make a change and all of the sudden like six things or seven things go wrong in completely unrelated areas

You did Medal of Honor during your first stint at EA. What was it like working on a reboot of a well-known series?
Ouch. Yeah. The interesting thing is I didn't agree with the reboot. I pushed back hard. What we pitched that year when we started working on this, when we were in preproduction... And don't forget this was like two years before Call of Duty: Black Ops came out. So what we pitched on Medal of Honor was sort of the end of World War II leading into the Cold War and the birth of special forces. We had a prototype where you were using grappling hooks and stuff, and raiding the ship base. We were going to do some really cool missions, and the executive came in and he heard the pitch and he said, "Guys, don't pitch me on a Cold War game. A Cold War game isn't going to sell." Two years later Black Ops came out and sells like, 15 million units [laughs]. So he wanted us to make a modern combat Afghanistan game... We started actually interacting with real-life soldiers, like former Navy SEALs and stuff like this, and some of the stories, pictures, and videos that we got back were pretty rough. I had started watching things on LiveLeak for reference and got a whole different exposure to a real world war that turned me off a little bit.

When you came back to EA after THQ, was the culture different from the first time you'd been at EA?
Not when I first got back. But yes, the instant Andrew Wilson took over as CEO. I have never, in my entire career, seen a bigger and faster change to a culture across a company this size than when Andrew Wilson took office. He changed everything. EA is still very big. We have to basically plan everything out, and project it, and estimate it, and prove that it fits, and get capacity to cover it if it doesn't. When Andrew Wilson started talking about players first and real-time engagement and listening to the players, I said to myself, "I have to get involved." And so I started the Twitter account and it's completely and utterly changed my approach to game design.

Did that come down to specific ideas?
We could talk for hours about all the crazy impacts it's had. Hearing feedback is one small thing. My Twitter feed flies and I see a bug, and I'm like, "Checkmark, checkmark, checkmark. Okay 30 people have now talked about this issue, this is becoming a thing, guys." But it goes beyond that. I'll give you one example: I get a tweet last year and the guy says, and I can basically tell that he's almost in tears just from the way he's writing his tweet, that he spent over $5,000 on Madden Ultimate Team, that his account got scammed and his team got stolen. I basically worked with that guy step-by-step, called him on the phone, Skyped with him, got him in touch with EA support...and a week later he's streaming. I show up in his chat and I'm like, "Go check your lineup." And he goes and checks his lineup and in front of 340 viewers, everything is restored. His team is back, his coins are back, he's freaking out – basically on the verge of tears that we were able to resolve this for him. And I'm like, "This is the greatest thing ever." I would have never thought, as a creative director, that I would ever be involved with something like this. But the feeling of gratification I got from seeing him through that process and getting him his team back was massive. Believe it or not, two users helped us solve our biggest crash last year.

In the early 2000s everybody had a full suite of sports games, but a lot of publishers have dropped out. Do you think the current lack of competition hurts you as a developer and as a fan of games?
I don't personally think it hurts us because we kind of look at FIFA and NBA 2K; we compare ourselves against other sports titles. We use that as competition. We definitely ding ourselves for the things we don't have that they have that people like. So, in that respect I think we definitely feel competitive pressure. If you look at it from a different angle, and I think some people will make this case: Well, if everybody knew that somebody else was making a football game EA would pour more resources into your team, basically fearing, "You have to go bigger and compete." I don't personally believe that that's true.

Do you think that we will ever see another heyday of sports video games with more video games and more developers?
I do not, and the reason why is because just think about what it would take to try to take on 2K or [EA] in basketball right now. The type of money and time and investment that you would have to make and then basically try to chip away at their market share somehow by making yourself different or better – when you think about how deep and wide these games are it's an almost impossible proposition. It would be a massive financial investment over a very small chance of success, in my opinion.

VR is being positioned as a new horizon for video games. What do you think is necessary for VR sports games to go beyond the quick minigame experiences for a triple-A, Madden-like experience?
I'm a VR owner. I got an Oculus right at launch. I've been very involved. I have a PlayStation VR on pre-order. I think the number one thing you have to solve is the locomotion problem. Getting tackled in first-person in VR is probably a difficult thing to do. I personally think if I was playing Madden from the default camera in VR that could be pretty cool. But it's probably not what I would want, which is like an inside-the-helmet, POV-type of experience. I actually think Madden is better suited for that than any other sports game. Mainly because of the quarterback position.

Going even further out, what's your pie-in-the-sky sports video game idea – something that maybe is unfathomable now that you think we might actually see in 10 years or so.
It's either going to go one of two ways for me. I think something like Rocket League, to me, something that isn't what people expect, but it breaks out because it's fun and people can engage with it. The other interesting thing for me is whether sport games could ever be successful eSports. The reason why I say this is because of the randomness of the dice rolls. Essentially that the ratings are determining outcomes instead of all user skill. I'm kind of wondering, in 10 years what Madden and 2K and others, their competitive eSports, are going to look like because in a game where you can get to the final play and you're the best player in the world, but on that one tackle the game decided, and rolled the dice and decided that his tackle rating was one point higher than your carry rating so you're going to fumble and you lose the game on that fumble. I'm just curious if we can get to a place where if there's a pass to something that is completely based on user skill, but still somehow was able to achieve that separation by player rating in the real world, if that makes sense. It's a very difficult problem but I've been thinking about it a lot. Essentially, what would a sports game that was completely user skill-based look like, I'm interested in something like that.

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1994
Dickson attends Marist College in New York, and is a three-year football starter along the offensive line, winning the MAAC conference championship in Division I AA in his senior year. His senior thesis for his child psychology minor compares the impact of violent video games versus violent cartoons on children

1996
Gets his first job in the industry as the lead QA tester on Turok: Dinosaur Hunter for the Nintendo 64

1998
Works for free at Cinematics. Within a month he's promoted to the role of lead designer for action-RPG title Revenant on PC

2000
Dickson serves as assistant lead designer on Turok Evolution at Iguana Studios. The dev team remembers Dickson from all the bugs he found in the first Turok title

2003
Dickson joins Electronic Arts for the first time to work on the Medal of Honor franchise, starting with European Assault, then Airborne, and finally as a producer for 2010's Medal of Honor reboot

2009
Works on Homefront, but instead of moving to THQ Montreal for Homefront 2, he goes to Australia after being excited by a first-person co-op beat 'em up demo for the first Avengers movie. THQ closes the studio and cancels the game in 2011 when the company hits financial troubles

2012
Returns to Electronic Arts as creative director for Madden NFL 25, NCAA 14, and all the Madden titles up to the present day

THE LEGAL REPERCUSSIONS OF POKÉMON GO

How a cultural phenomenon is changing state laws

by Elise Favis

Since its release in July, the augmented reality game Pokémon Go has amassed major media attention. Outside of the cautionary tales of car accidents and people falling off cliffs, there has also been a fascinating legal response. By blurring the line between physical and digital space, Pokémon Go is sparking a debate in the legal world across several states.

From New York banning 3,000 registered sex offenders on parole from playing the game, to a fight to preserve eco-sensitive and historic sites in Illinois, Pokémon Go's cultural impact isn't just affecting gamers, but also the world around us. Lawmakers are being forced to address issues they didn't know existed, and this is just the beginning.

Pidgey's Law

Kelly Cassidy, a state representative of Illinois, has been playing Pokémon Go with her kids and staff since its launch. "I play the game, I love it," she says. "I'm having a blast. I started playing it right after it came out and my chief of staff and I were both playing."

Pokémon Go had such an impact on her, she centered a voter registration meet-up around it in Chicago's Rogers Park during the month of July.

Within just two weeks of the event, the tide began to shift. Cassidy began receiving complaints from concerned citizens that Pokémon Go was threatening an eco-sensitive preservation site in that same area. The Loyola Dunes is home to native wildlife and plants that are being regrown and restored. Soon, it became home to several Pokémon when a PokéStop was pinned to a non-existent art installation in the middle of the dunes.

As the area became one of the hottest sites for Pokémon hunting in the city, the dunes saw an increase in trampling of wildlife, a rise in littering, and Pokémon-themed vandalism.

Much of Pokémon Go's location data comes from Niantic Labs' previous augmented-reality title Ingress, making certain hotspots inaccurate or outdated, such as the PokéStop in the Loyola Dunes.

The dunes' preservation workers were livid. Cassidy realized that, while Pokémon Go was bringing a community together, it was also inadvertently damaging wildlife. Hundreds of requests were sent to Niantic for the removal of the PokéStop, but the developer largely ignored the problem until Cassidy introduced a bill called Pidgey's Law. Within 24 hours, the PokéStop was removed.

The bill, which has yet to be passed, would force the removal of properties deemed dangerous, ecologically sensitive, historic, or privately owned. The property owner, manager, or custodian can request removal, and if Niantic does not comply within two days, the developer will receive a $100 fine for each day it remains in-game.

Around The World

[redacted]

Cassidy says there is some leeway for business owners who want their properties removed from the game if they feel its inclusion is detrimental to their enterprises.

"My local pub is a PokéStop, and they're bloody generous. They lure that thing all the time," she says. "But if my business is a funeral home, maybe not so much. I think that we have to find that balance, and that's what this bill is trying to do."

The bill itself is not restricted to Pokémon Go, but instead incorporates all location-based games.

As for the Loyola Dunes, Cassidy believes what happened isn't all negative, and that the increase of visitors was actually a net positive. "The popularity of that site is 99-percent positive, and just from the perspective of a city dweller, the idea that there could be a space that hundreds of people people gather day and night and not have complaints about anything is stunning to me in reality."

Banning Sex Offenders

While Illinois' concerns with Pokémon Go were primarily about property law, other states have raised questions relating to public safety. In August, New York Governor Andrew M. Cuomo directed the New York State Department of Corrections and Supervision to ban registered sex offenders on parole from playing location-based games like Pokémon Go.

This is in response to an investigation conducted by state senators Diane Savino and Jeffrey Klein, who published a report about Pokémon Go and registered sex offenders. They discovered 73 percent of the registered sex offender addresses they checked were in close proximity to PokéStops or gyms.

"[The governor] saw our reports, and he realized how potentially dangerous this could be," Savino says. "Through an executive order, he has instructed the State and the Division of Parole, probation, and the Department of Correction, to institute a ban."

Governor Cuomo also sent a letter to Niantic, but Savino confirmed the developer has "not responded" yet.

This ban is an interim solution, but the state hopes to pass bills that would outline further restrictions, including the removal of PokéStops and gyms in a 100-foot radius of registered sex offender addresses. If passed, this bill would give Niantic or any other developer a $100 fine per day if it doesn't comply.

The situation raises questions surrounding sex-offender rights and their access to entertainment. Currently, sex offenders in New York are banned from accessing social media, and specifying where location-based games fit into these laws is one factor being addressed.

"We want developers and manufacturers to take into consideration that there are predators out there that will play their game, and to think about that as they develop the game," Savino says.

Blending Digital And Physical Space

Pokémon Go has reached over 500 million downloads, a staggering number for a game that released just a few months ago. Its influence is indisputable, but is Pokémon Go already a withering trend? With the number of active monthly users plummeting, it seems that Pokémon Go is losing some of the foothold it had during its peak in July. It nonetheless retains a strong following, suggesting that its profitable concept will likely return in full force, as developers could reap success from similarly constructed games.

Legal issues such as these continue to be in flux, and the examples above illustrate how this technology is challenging lawmakers to not just stay relevant, but also asks when they should step in without hurting a business like Niantic's. Cyberspace isn't as otherworldly as it once was, and it's up to lawmakers and developers to find common ground as we approach a future where the physical and digital world intersect.

PLAYSTATION 4 SLIM

Sony's most recent hardware refresh rounds off a few corners and removes the mid-console light strip, but this is still the same PS4 you've come to know. Measuring 10x11x1.5 inches, the PlayStation 4 Slim is only a tiny bit smaller than the original model, but it runs a bit quieter and uses less power than Sony's first iteration. We appreciate the tactile power and reset buttons, which no longer trigger when you accidentally brush over them. Unfortunately, this release removes the optical audio out jack from the back of the console, which might leave audiophiles in a lurch.

The Slim also comes packaged with an updated DualShock 4 controller (also sold separately), which features a light strip along the top touchpad. With Sony's 4K-compatible PlayStation 4 Pro right around the corner, you might want to hold off on updating your console, but if you were about to buy a PS4 anyway, this is a great console.

VERY GOOD

$299.99 (500GB) | *playstation.com*

1 GEM Box

Short for games, entertainment, and multimedia, the GEM Box aims to be an all-in-one media-streaming device with some modest gaming options. The GEM Box is incredibly easy to set up, and like most streaming devices, it works with services like Netflix, Hulu, and HBO Go, but you can also use it to stream content from your phone, tablet, or PC to a nearby TV.

Featuring a Quad-Core 1.5 GHz CPU, 1GB of DDR RAM and an ARM Mali-450MP6 GPU, this machine is far from a gaming powerhouse, but if you have a Gamefly account, you can stream a limited selection of titles, including highlights like Batman: Arkham Asylum, BioShock, and Borderlands. We were actually impressed with the limited lag even while streaming twitchy fighting games like BlazBlue: Calamity Trigger.

The GEM Box controller is better than those of most streaming machines thanks to the fact that it apes the Xbox 360's design in almost every way. Unfortunately, its plastic shell feels cheap, and its buttons are stiff. However, the controller's toggleable mouse mode is extremely useful while browsing the internet and searching for games on the Google Play store.

We wouldn't say the GEM Box is a bad device, but media-streaming machines make up an incredibly saturated market, and you can already find a host of products – such as the Amazon Fire Stick, Google Chromecast, and Roku – that deliver the same content in a sleeker package, have a better interface, and come with a smaller price tag.

LIMITED APPEAL

$99.99 | *emtec-gembox.com*

2 Transformers Generations Titans Return Fortress Maximus

The latest collectible figures from the ever-popular Transformers brand sees the return of an old concept – smaller figures that become the heads of larger robots. These new sculpts pay homage to many classic characters like Optimus Prime and Soundwave. The pièce de résistance of the new line is the awesomely crafted and nearly two-foot-tall Fortress Maximus, whose detachable transforming head is so big that it has its own detachable transforming head.

$149.99 | *hasbrotoyshop.com*

ART OF ATARI

Sourced from museums and private collections, this gorgeous coffee-table book covers over 40 years of Atari history. In addition to the collection of Atari's illustrations and advertisements, this book features several behind-the-scenes stories on how several Atari classics were initially conceived and brought to life.

$39.99
artofatari.com

LEVEL UP BY GENE LUEN YANG & THIEN PHAM

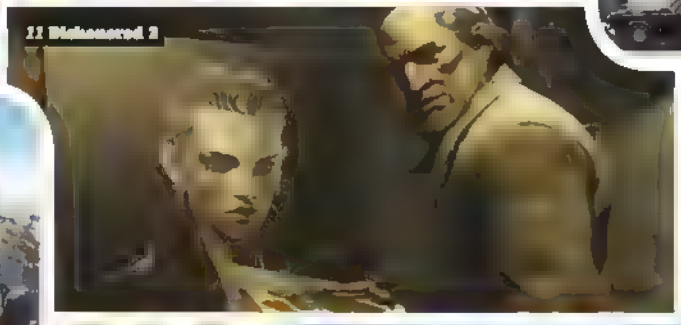
Dennis Ouyang has always struggled to live up to his parent's expectations, but after his father dies and he is kicked out of college, Dennis' world flips upside down as the video game world begins to invade his reality.

$9.99
geneyang.com/level-up

SOUTH PARK: SEASON 19

Catch up on the gossip around South Park before the release of The Fractured but Whole. In Season 19 of Comedy Central's premier animated show, the citizens of South Park deal with a new politically correct principal, celebrate the opening of a Whole Foods, and battle sentient advertisements.

$29.99
southpark.cc.com



November

01.1 Marvel Number Ones

Marvel is introducing a number of series this month, including new takes on the Avengers, Iron Man, Black Panther, Venom, and Thanos. Along with a new self-titled *Avengers* book, Marvel is releasing *Occupy Avengers*, and *The Unworthy Thor*. *Invincible Iron Man* follows the latest character to don the suit, Riri Williams.

01.2 Unite Los Angeles 2016

This three-day convention is dedicated solely to the Unity engine. Developers from across the globe are here to discuss Unity's future and share their findings. If you are an indie developer, or are interested in creating games, this is a great show to learn about one of the most used engines in the industry.

02 Virtual Reality Developers Conference 2016

Held in San Francisco for two days, this conference explores all things virtual reality, and includes talks that range from game post mortems to various developers sharing their latest breakthroughs in this fledgling gaming medium.

04.1 Doctor Strange

Benedict Cumberbatch and Rachel McAdams star in today's *Doctor Strange*, a Marvel Cinematic Universe film about a former neurosurgeon who becomes an inter-dimensional super hero. Following *Captain America: Civil War*, this is the second film in Marvel's Phase Three of interconnected stories.

04.2 Blizzcon 2016

The tenth annual BlizzCon kicks off today and runs through the weekend. Blizzard uses this event to celebrate its numerous game series, but also uses the show to announce new products. What can we expect this year? Overwatch and World of Warcraft will certainly be front and center, but we also wouldn't be surprised if Diablo makes a splash.

04.3 New Releases

- Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare *(PS4, Xbox One, PC)*
- Football Manager 2017 *(PC)*
- Mario Party: Star Rush *(3DS)*

08 New Releases

- Cartoon Network: Battle Crashers *(PS4, Xbox One, 3DS)*
- Eagle Flight *(PSVR)*

08 Mother Panic

Gotham City welcomes another vigilante, and her name is Mother Panic. Under the costume is Violet Paige, a celebrity with a troubling past. The first issue of *Mother Panic* ships today, and is penned by Jody Houser.

11 New Releases

- Dishonored 2 *(PS4, Xbox One, PC)*

15 New Releases

- Watch Dogs 2 *(PS4, Xbox One, PC)*

18.1 New Releases

- Killing Floor 2 *(PS4, PC)*
- Planet Coaster *(PC)*
- Pokémon Sun and Moon *(3DS)*

18.2 Fantastic Beasts And Where To Find Them

It's been a big year for muggles, starting with the release of *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, a new story that focuses on Harry Potter's children. Next up is today's theatrical release of *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, which is adapted from J. K. Rowling's textbook of the same name. The film follows a character named Newt Scamander (played by Eddie Redmayne), and shows us what the wizarding world is like in New York City.

25 Bad Santa 2

Let's all agree on something. *Bad Santa* is one of the best holiday films of all time. No, it isn't suitable for the entire family, but it is a lot of fun, and the sequel *Bad Santa 2*, opening in cinemas today, looks to be fired from the same foul cannon.

29 New Releases

- The Crew: Calling All Units *(PS4, Xbox One, PC)*
- Final Fantasy XV *(PS4, Xbox One)*
- Star Trek: Bridge Crew *(PSVR, Rift, Vive)*

THE HOTTEST STUFF
FROM THE **POWER UP REWARDS** CATALOG

Life-size Alien Facehugger & Egg

10¢/gal in Fuel Rewards savings

San Diego Comic Con Exclusive
Suicide Squad Joker Tattoo
Plush Figure

Socks

Doctor Who TARDIS Box Cross
Body Bag

POWERUP REWARDS EXCLUSIVE

KontrolFreek Spaceland Zombies
Thumbsticks

POWERUP REWARDS EXCLUSIVE

Posters

Harry Potter Caps

Scarves

All PowerUp Rewards Catalog items are available while supplies last.

REWARD CERTIFICATES available up to **$50!**

$5 Valid
$10 Valid
$25 Valid in-store

Spend your points today!
Visit **PowerUpRewards.com** or download the GameStop App.
New rewards are added all the time!

Platform
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

Style
1-Player Role-Playing/
Strategy

Publisher
Ubisoft

Developer
Ubisoft San Francisco

Release
2017

CHILD'S PLAY

South Park: The Fractured But Whole Is Primed To Lampoon Comic-Book Culture

You helped recover the Stick of Truth from the Drow Elves in Kyle's backyard. You prevented an army of Nazi zombies from destroying the town. You retrieved your underpants from a secret gnome village, escaped an alien abduction, and even traveled across the exotic lands of Canada. As the new kid in South Park, you made a lot of friends and ultimately saved the town from certain annihilation.

Unfortunately, your town's safety is in danger once again. From the shadows, criminals breed a culture of injustice. Society's filth and vermin bubble up from the sewers and threaten to consume the quiet mountain town you now call home. This city is sick. But you have the cure. You have something that can stop this rising tide of injustice. You have the one thing that will send criminals everywhere running in fear. You have a magic butthole.

By Ben Reeves

FRANCHISE PLAN
PHASE 1
PHASE 2
PHASE 3
The COON Movie
SUPERCRAIG
COON and Friends
FASTPASS
ASTPASS vs MOSQUITO
YOUNG COON
YOUNG PROFESSOR CHAOS
BEGIN PREQUELS
MOSQUITO
SUPERCRAIG 3
FASTPASS 2
COON y Amigos

KNOCKED IT OUT OF THE SOUTH PARK

They said they'd never make a game again. Matt Stone and Trey Parker, the prolific creators behind *South Park*, had spent 20 years pushing social boundaries on Comedy Central's Emmy-winning show. They'd created critically acclaimed films, been nominated for an Oscar, and written a Tony and Grammy-winning musical. And yet, video games had nearly pushed these two polymaths to the breaking point.

South Park: The Stick of Truth had a raucous development. THQ, the original publisher, folded before the game's release, and Ubisoft had to swoop in to bring Obsidian's RPG to market. Stone and Parker had never been as intimately involved in a game's development before Stick, so the whole process seemed like a challenge. Accustomed to the lightning-fast turnarounds of their television show, *South Park's* creators were turned off by the slow evolution of game development and the writing demands of interactive fiction.

In 2014, Stone told *IGN*, "This was a hellacious undertaking – much more than when we signed up for it." Game development proved so exhausting that the duo said onstage at E3 2015 they would never do it again. The only problem was they couldn't scratch the itch that they could do it better.

After South Park: The Stick of Truth released to critical praise and sold over five million copies, a sequel excited Ubisoft. However, Stone and Parker didn't want Ubisoft to shuffle the project off to any random development studio. Near the end of Stick of Truth's development, South Park's creators had worked closely with producers from Ubisoft San Francisco's office. The duo felt they had built a trust with the people there, and they wanted to continue to work with that office.

"We were asked, 'What do you think, can you guys do it?'" says senior producer Jason Schroeder, who was in the room with Stone and Parker during The Fractured But Whole's early design meetings. "We were immediately like, 'Yes, absolutely,' and then, 'S---, how do we do that?'"

Ubisoft San Francisco wants to make sure players don't feel like they're exploring the exact same world. To this end, the team has added a new row of homes for players to explore as well as new areas within existing locations

Battles in The Fractured But Whole are a bit longer than the last game and will average around 10 minutes

Even from the outside, it seemed absurd that Ubisoft San Francisco would take on a project as big as South Park, given its development history. The office had been around for nearly 25 years, but for almost two decades it was primarily a marketing and PR hub. When the studio finally started developing games, its first title was Rocksmith, the 2011 music game that used real instruments to teach players how to play guitar. Rocksmith was critically well-received and considered a financial success within Ubisoft, but it was still a music game. Did the scrappy team behind Rocksmith have the pedigree to develop an RPG based on one of the biggest comedy franchises in the world?

"We always said we never wanted to be just a music studio," says game director Paul Cross. "We never wanted to be just the Rocksmith studio. We wanted to grow, we wanted to do different titles. After Rocksmith's success we had the opportunity to take South Park, and it's been a really good fit, because we have a really diverse team who all grew up watching the show."

In fact, calling Ubisoft San Francisco the "Rocksmith Studio" is a misnomer, because the team has been largely rebuilt for South Park. While a small splinter group within the studio continues to work on Rocksmith projects, the majority of Ubisoft San Francisco's development team has been culled from other studios. Many at the studio have resumes featuring big-name franchises such as God of War, BioShock, Ratchet and Clank, and Telltale's The Walking Dead. Ubisoft San Francisco's animation department has two animators who worked at Obsidian on The Stick of Truth, as well as one designer who worked at South Park Digital Studios on the show itself.

Hiring game developers from around the world was an important stepping stone to creating a studio that could develop a game like South Park. However, in order to better interface with the creative whims of Stone and Parker, the team also needed to rethink its development process.

Locations from the last couple seasons of the show, such as SodoSopa, will be represented in the game world

STEALING THE SHOW

South Park has a deceptively simple aesthetic that has proved challenging to emulate in a video game. For the show, South Park Studios uses Autodesk Maya to animate all of its characters. The process is entirely digital, but at its heart *South Park* is still a stop-motion cartoon. This means that each character is constructed from thousands and thousands of tiny pieces of digital paper, which make up their various expressions and body postures. To translate this into a game, all of these various body postures and expressions need to be loaded up so that they can be flipped on and off as a character moves about the scene. So even though *South Park*'s visuals look like an eight-year-old's shoebox diorama, they are incredibly taxing shoeboxes to animate.

While developing The Stick of Truth, Obsidian worked around some of these problems by converting the show's assets into Flash animations. The studio also built the entire game in a program designed primarily for in-game menus and other user interfaces. This labor-intensive process is part of the reason The Stick of Truth featured long load times even when a player was only transitioning into an environment as small as a two-story home.

To circumvent these issues, Ubisoft San Francisco looked for a new engine that would allow the team to take South Park Studio's Maya assets and seamlessly drop them into a game. The team settled on Massive's Snowdrop engine, which it created for The Division. However, converting Snowdrop for use on the Fractured But Whole wasn't easy; Ubisoft's engineers spent 18 months reworking the code that powered a shooter/MMO so it could bring foul-mouthed construction paper cutouts to life.

Ubisoft San Francisco felt this effort was time well spent. Stone, Parker, and the rest of South Park Studios are used to an incredibly brisk development cycle. As chronicled in the documentary *6 Days to Air*, each episode of *South Park* is created from scratch over the course of just six days. No video game studio can hope to keep pace with this insane, high-speed iteration, but Ubisoft San Francisco aimed to get as close as possible.

"Our priority was to try to work like the show," Schroeder says. "We took The Division engine and took all of their beautiful rendering techniques and shut them off, and we took their online stuff and shut all that off. Then we realized 'Oh yeah, [The Division] doesn't have a pause button.' So we had to write pause from scratch. .but it was worth it, because we wanted to make sure that Matt and Trey had all the tools they were used to so they could make their best comedy experience."

THE GAME'S INFLUENCE ON THE SHOW

Early in development, senior producer Jason Schroeder remembers searching for visual references of South Park's most popular characters when he stumbled across a collection of yaoi fan art depicting a couple of the South Park boys in intimate, even romantic, poses. "I showed it to them once over board games, and they had never seen them before," Schroeder says. "Trey looked at them and said, 'We'll make a show about it,' and then months and months later was that Tweek and Craig episode. They're never not thinking about the show."

MOUTH FULL OF SOUTH

South Park: The Stick of Truth ends with players saving the world from an alien menace and becoming one of the most popular kids in town. In the world of elementary-school politics, however, that kind of popularity doesn't last. The Fractured But Whole picks up right where The Stick of Truth left off, with the kids playing a fantasy-themed role-playing game. However, they are soon interrupted by Cartman, dressed in his superhero persona, The Coon. He abruptly changes the rules.

"Cartman wants to find Scrambles, who is this cat," says narrative designer Jolie Menzel. "He's like, 'Scrambles is lost. The town is going to s---!' He kinda uses this cat as an avatar for the town falling into crime. On a psychological level, Cartman always wants to be the center of attention, and the fact that you won the Stick of Truth means that you're the king, and you're the coolest. Our first battle is you as the King laying waste to these Stick of Truth kids and you look awesome, and then The Coon comes in and is like 'actually you're not. You're just a scrub, just a sidekick. Fill out your character sheet.'"

Cartman works with you to complete your superhero identity, and as you run missions for the other kids (as their sidekick) you slowly rebuild your notoriety. These missions are full of the crude South Park humor fans have grown to love. During one early sequence, the New Kid accompanies Scott Malkinson, a.k.a. Captain Diabetes, to the Peppermint Hippo strip club where they press a couple of businessmen for important information by giving them lap dances, which is an interactive minigame.

As you level up and continue to fill out your character sheet, Cartman gives you added opportunities to revisit your origin story and mix-and-match different superpowers from various superhero classes. Early on, you have access to only three superhero archetypes, but as your backstory evolves, you'll unlock up to 12 different classes such as the technologist, the magician, and the mentalist. Each has its own unique superhero talents. By the end of the game, your power combinations seem nearly limitless.

THE CLOTHES MAKE THE SUPERMAN

For The Fractured But Whole, Ubisoft San Francisco wanted players to feel free to experiment with various costumes to find the look they liked best without worrying about which gear offered the best defense. With that in mind, the studio has decoupled gear from stat augmentation. Now costumes are purely aesthetic, while artifacts confer stat boosts. Here are a few examples of in game costumes. Players can mix and-match each piece of headgear with their costumes to find a look that best suits their hero.

The new kid has the unnaturally powerful ability to fart on command, so many of the super skills play off this unique artistry. For example, you might start off with a few powers from the energy-blaster class, which allows you to unleash a series of deadly fireball-like farts that inflict burning and gross-out damage. You can have up to four powers at once, so to balance out your flaming flatulence you might also give yourself a few healing abilities. Alternatively, you might pick up a few powers from the bruiser class, which imbues your hero with Hulk-like uppercuts. Or you could supplement your brawn with a brainy power like Bedazzles, a ruthless mental assault that "damages and confuses a foe as you overload their mind and deliver images of your grandma's favorite holiday sweater."

"You're not picking a class at the beginning of the game and saying that's it," says lead game designer Kenneth Strickland. "Instead you are workshopping your superhero and your backstory as you play through the entire game. Pretty fast you're starting to borrow from multiple classes, mixing and matching powers. You can go back to Cartman and change up your power set whenever you want. As you learn more about the game, you start to assemble a superhero that is vastly different from anything you've seen before."

The New Kid isn't the only kid in South Park with super powers, either. All of the kids in town have their own unique gimmicks and super abilities. As you journey through the story you can convince many of them to join your superhero squad. Not only will they join you in combat, but outside of battle you can combine your powerful farts with their unique abilities. For example, Kyle is the Human Kite, meaning he can fly (and he has laser eyes, of course). When you combine your farts with Kyle's kiting skills you launch yourself into the air, allowing you to access otherwise unreachable areas within South Park.

Those who played The Stick of Truth might think there aren't many areas within South Park left to explore. After all, The Fractured But Whole is set inside the same town and takes place only a couple of days after the events of The Stick of Truth. However, the last couple of seasons of the show have presented Ubisoft with a few opportunities to naturally revamp the town in-game.

"We were watching season 19, and I literally had our town map up and I was like, 'S---, I guess this is all moving here,'" says Menzel. "I had to update the town map every week, because they were changing the town and all the gentrification that was happening. ..We really have no idea what they're going to do this season, so we're kind of hoping it's not as bombastic, but even if it is, our game is built in such a way that we can roll with those punches."

Like the show, Kenny's house is now in the center of the defunct commercial district, SodoSopa. Meanwhile, the area of town around City Wok has been gentrified, so it is now called CtPaTown. As players explore downtown they'll discover new locations such as a mob-run Italian restaurant, a Raisins, and a Freeman's Tacos (see Crafty Boys sidebar). Even completionists who looked under every rock in The Stick of Truth will find more than a few surprises in The Fractured But Whole.

Most of the game's attacks have their own shape, so they affect the board in different ways. For example, some attacks might move in a diagonal direction while others hit every enemy in a straight line or in a circle around your character

CRAFTY BOYS

In The Stick of Truth, players could amass a Walmart's worth of loot, but this loot collecting sometimes surpassed a player's need for new gear to the point that players could sometimes upgrade their characters multiple times before encountering another battle.

In The Fractured But Whole, all of the random junk players collect throughout the game has added value as a crafting resource. Aside from being a good place to hide references to classic *South Park* episodes, most of the loot can be broken down into components, which in turn can be used to craft new costumes, consumables, and other key items.

In order to learn about crafting and artifacts, players visit Freeman's Tacos downtown, where they'll encounter Morgan Freeman himself. Freeman functions as the Lucius Fox to your Batman, helping equip you for battle by selling you new gear, costumes, and crafting resources.

Some of the most important items players craft are called artifacts, and these unique tools improve your stats in a variety of ways. Players equip these artifacts by literally shoving them up their character's butt. As your hero progresses through the game, his or her magical butthole expands to be able to equip multiple artifacts at a time.

Players are able to mix and match powers from up to 12 different classes that they will unlock throughout the game

BLASTER

Rad Burn
A salvo of ionized-gas fireballs that deals damage and Burning to the Blaster's enemy

Ionic Ass Cannon
In direct contravention of Intergalactic Law, this death fart deals existential damage and inflicts Burning and Gross Out across a cone of devastation.

Gamma Wave
The Blaster unleashes a gamma ray shockwave that damages and knocks back a nearby column of foes.

Plasma Lance
The Blaster unloads a potent beam of space radiation and intestinal fury dealing damage to all hostiles in the target area

Don't just watch the world burn, light it on fire yourself as a Blaster. These damage dealers are deadly at any range

DAWN OF JUST ASS

The first act of The Fractured But Whole centers on the kids playing their game of superheroes, which apes recent blockbusters like *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*, and *Captain America: Civil War*. The kids bicker over Cartman's franchise plan to release a series of Coon and Friend's movies and Netflix shows, which eventually causes a rift among the kids. Cartman continues to lead The Coon and Friends alongside characters like Jimmy Valmer (Fastpass) and Scott Malkinson (Captain Diabetes). Meanwhile, heroes like Kenny McCormick (Mysterion), Stan Marsh (Toolshed), and Wendy Testaburger (Call Girl) take off to form their own superhero group called The Freedom Pals.

Later in the game, Cartman sends you to infiltrate The Freedom Pals, but as you continue to recruit more kids to your side, it becomes obvious the town has larger problems than your elementary school squabbles. Butters, a.k.a. Professor Chaos, receives a massive amount of cash from a shadowy figure, and he uses this money to betray his friends, buy dogs and day laborers as his minions, and then floods the streets of South Park with red Lego bricks – which the kids pretend is lava.

"They are just kids playing a game, and that's a nice layer we have in the game," Schroeder says. "The adults are doing something different that's a lot bigger, and the kids never stop playing their game. Anytime we've had things going hyper dark, there's something compelling about it, but we still want to ground it. We want you to feel like you're going to get called home to go to bed at any moment because the sun is setting."

For the story in particular, Ubisoft San

THE DNA OF DIFFICULTY

Ideal game difficulty is largely a matter of personal preference. Games that are too easy for one player might be just right for another. For that reason, Ubisoft San Francisco wanted players to be able to adjust The Fractured But Whole's difficulty to suit their desires. However, the team also wanted a system that integrated into the story.

Since the kids of South Park are playing a game where they get to choose their own powers, it made sense to allow players to determine their superhero lineage. At any point in the game, players can open up the Hero DNA app on their in-game cell phones and tweak the difficulty by changing their superhero DNA.

Since genetics are often passed down and skip a generation, players get to pick who their grandparents were and what kind of superpowers they had, which in turn affects their performance in battle. Using this narrative conceit, players can throttle The Fractured But Whole's difficultly to suit their needs. For example, you might be able to say something like your grandmother drank radioactive waste as a child and that's why you automatically heal a little every turn.

"We wanted to get down to a place where people could say, 'It's a touch too hard. I want to play with this rule, but not that rule,'" says lead game designer Kenneth Strickland. "If you're just trying to make the game easier so you can get through the main plot, you can do that, but we didn't want to ignore players who are really into tactics, so at any time you can turn these modifiers on, making it harder for yourself. The harder you make the game, the more of a chance you have to earn prestige loot."

Francisco wanted South Park's creators to have the freedom they needed to create a strong yet humorous narrative. Parker delivers game scenes formatted like movie scripts using an old program called Movie Magic Screenwriter, which the team then reconfigures to suit their needs. It would have helped the studio to have the game's basic narrative plotted out before designing encounters, but creative forces don't always work in a linear fashion. During development, Ubisoft gave Stone and Parker the freedom to flip-flop scenes, scrap whole sequences, and even restructure the entire second act... which they did...multiple times.

"They don't write chronologically," Menzel says. "They go for the gag, and they build around that. It has been really enriching working with them, seeing how they do things from a joke perspective, and seeing when they kill a joke. It's like the Spartan boys of jokes, because only the strongest survive."

This kind of creative freedom means nothing is sacred. Even details presumably established in The Stick of Truth might get changed in The Fractured But Whole. Thankfully, the team is always eager to make fun of these changes.

For example, at some point in the game, one of the kids notices the New Kid hasn't filled out the gender portion of the character sheet. He tells you that if you have any questions you should go talk to the school counselor.

"If you visit Mr. Mackey he says, 'Oh, you want to talk about gender issues, m'kay,'" Schroeder says. "'Well, gender is really simple. You're either a boy, or a girl, or you might identify as neither.' If players choose to identify as a girl, he'll say, 'Well, I guess that retcons Stick of Truth, m'kay.' Mr. Mackey sort of becomes the way of talking about inclusivity and gender identity ...Cisgendered male is just one way of playing the game. I highly recommend playing the game as a black woman."

CLOSE QUARTERS COMBUTT

While Stone and Parker iterated on The Fractured But Whole's narrative, Ubisoft San Francisco did some heavy iteration of its own. The Stick of Truth's combat was simple and effective, but it lacked tactical depth. For inspiration, Ubisoft San Francisco looked at board games and other tactical RPGs like XCOM, Darkest Dungeon, and Fire Emblem. Early prototypes looked a bit like Skulls of the Shogun as the team searched for a mix of rich strategy and easy pick-up-and-play mechanics. To test out their growing list of mechanics, the studio actually built their own physical board game.

"Once we settled on the big board-game concept, we looked around to see what was on hand," Strickland says. "What was on hand was the Assassin's Creed: Arena board game, so we began using these characters for the exact wrong purpose, 'Okay, just pretend this guy with the spear is Cartman.' We experimented with a whole bunch of different rules in this safe board-game space. One of the nice things about starting with the board game is being able to prototype things in a real space without committing all the coder hours to actually get it up and running."

It's easy to see The Fractured But Whole's board-game roots during combat encounters. An explicit turn order is clearly laid out at the bottom of the screen, and characters move around the battlefield on an evenly distributed grid. Cover offers some safety, while other environmental hazards can be exploited to deal extra damage. Battles also tend to last around 10 minutes – a good bit longer than the average Stick of Truth encounter. As in Stick of Truth, your characters' health even refills after a battle so that each confrontation can offer a balanced challenge.

In addition to a host of random battles, The Fractured But Whole features more than 50 handcrafted encounters with varying win conditions, such as protecting specific people or things, laying siege to an entire enemy force, or reaching a certain point on the battlefield. Most of the boss fights even feature unique mechanics you won't see during an average encounter.

"We wanted to make it so that literally anyone who watches the show can play this and get tactical depth without having this invisible rulebook off to one side," Strickland says.

All of the kids have their own unique power sets, but unlike The Stick of Truth you won't have to manage a mana-like resource. Instead, most of your companions' attacks function on cooldowns, which encourages players to experiment with each heroes' various abilities.

"We're always throttling this line between the boys are playing a game so this is all in their minds, and they really are superheroes so you need to feel badass," Schroeder says. "You can't just have it feel like little kids slapping each other. When you play with them, you will actually see Jimmy move as fast as the Flash. You'll see Kyle use laser eyes, but really it's happening in their imaginations."

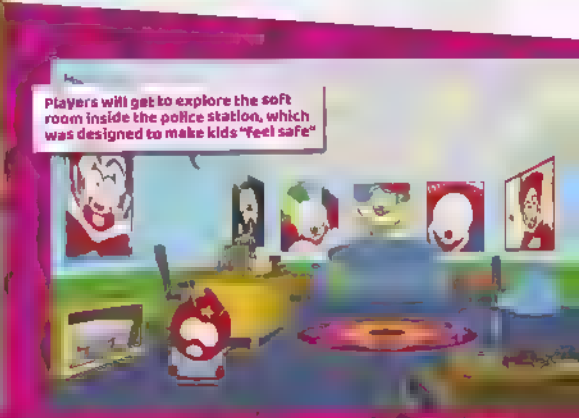
As you and your buddies dish out damage during battle, you slowly build up an ultimate meter. Once full, this meter unlocks an assortment of often overpowered super moves. This meter is shared by your entire team, so you must carefully choose who gets to let loose, but ultimate attacks are often game changers that allow you to do things such as take out a large group of enemies all at once or refill your entire team's health reserves.

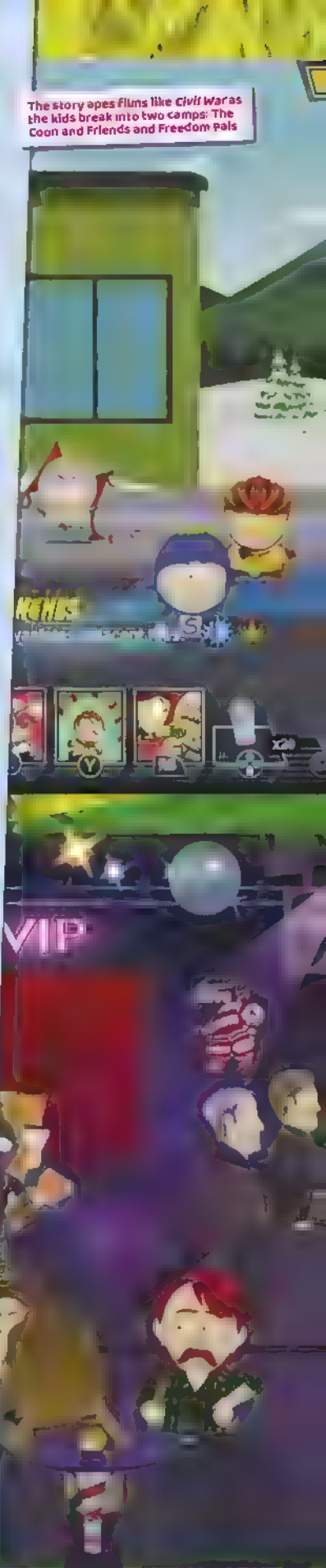
"We refer to ultimates as a kind of Titanfall," Cross says. "You're guaranteed to get at least one in battle, but you might be able to get two if you play well."

The final component of The Fractured But Whole's combat is the power to manipulate time on the battlefield. As the new kid, you have a power your friends don't: magical time farts. During combat, you can use your farts to rewind time and steal an enemy's turn or send your allies up in the turn order. These powerful fart attacks come with longer cooldowns than the traditional attack, but they are a vital strategic option that can swing a battle in your favor.

Players who found The Stick of Truth's Paper Mario-inspired combat a little too simplistic can rest assured that The Fractured But Whole's encounters feature a great deal more depth. The addition of a gridded space full of interactive objects, a host of more powerful ultimate attacks, and the ability to manipulate the turn order give players a wider range of tactical options during a fight. At the same time, The Fractured But Whole's mechanics never feel overly complex.

The game references elements from South Park's Coon and Friends episodes, such as Cthulhu and Captain Hindsight, but they won't be a big part of the game's narrative
1340 TICKET
1340 TICKET





NEW KID AND FRIENDS

As you explore South Park and fight crime, you slowly recruit more kids to your team. By the end of the game you can have nearly a dozen buddies, double the number of companions from The Stick of Truth. Here are a few of the heroes available to fight alongside.

THE COON

Secret Identity: Eric Cartman
Bio: The Coon is one of the first superheroes in the South Park universe. He likes to take charge, but he's also extremely selfish. Naturally, The Coon talks a big game, but players might occasionally see him trip or make other mistakes, revealing his flaws.
Powers: Described as a Ninja Manimal, The Coon is a close-combat fighter with a lot of furious attacks that can hit multiple enemies and cause bleed damage.

SUPER CRAIG

Secret Identity: Craig Tucker
Bio: One of the most cynical and deadpan kids in school, Super Craig doesn't seem to care about much. He's "dating" Wonder Tweek, but during the Civil War split, Wonder Tweek joins the Freedom Pals, which creates an interesting tension between the two characters.
Powers: Super Craig is a solid heavy hitter and good at drawing aggro. Craig has a propensity for flipping people off, so one of his attacks is a super finger that upsets and enrages his foes. Super Craig's ultimate attack also involves the romantic yaoi art featuring both Craig and Tweek.

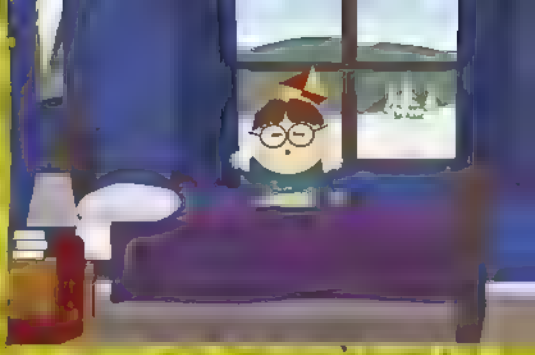
CALL GIRL

Secret Identity: Wendy Testaburger
Bio: Wendy is the first playable girl in a South Park RPG, and most of her powers revolve around her expert use of social media. Call Girl is a bit of a Batman-like character, because most of her powers are natural skills and she's really good at using technology.
Powers: Using her cell phone, Call Girl can send mean tweets at a character to distract them or create a flash mob that tramples enemies. When her foes get too close she has twin selfie sticks that she can use to deliver a physical beat down.

THE HUMAN KITE

Secret Identity: Kyle Broflovski
Bio: The Human Kite is a young boy with all of the strengths and weaknesses of a kite. Out of battle, the player can team up with the Human Kite to fly to otherwise unreachable areas. In battle, Kite also has laser eyes, which makes him a threat even from a distance.
Powers: The Human Kite functions a bit like a bard in battle. His low HP means you want to keep him away from the front lines, but his healing powers and ability to yank friends back from hot spots makes him an important part of any team.

Ubisoft says it has streamlined the use of South Parks assets to make a smoother gameplay experience, and that The Fractured But Whole wouldn't work on a Xbox 360 or PS3 console



THE SHOW MUST GO ON

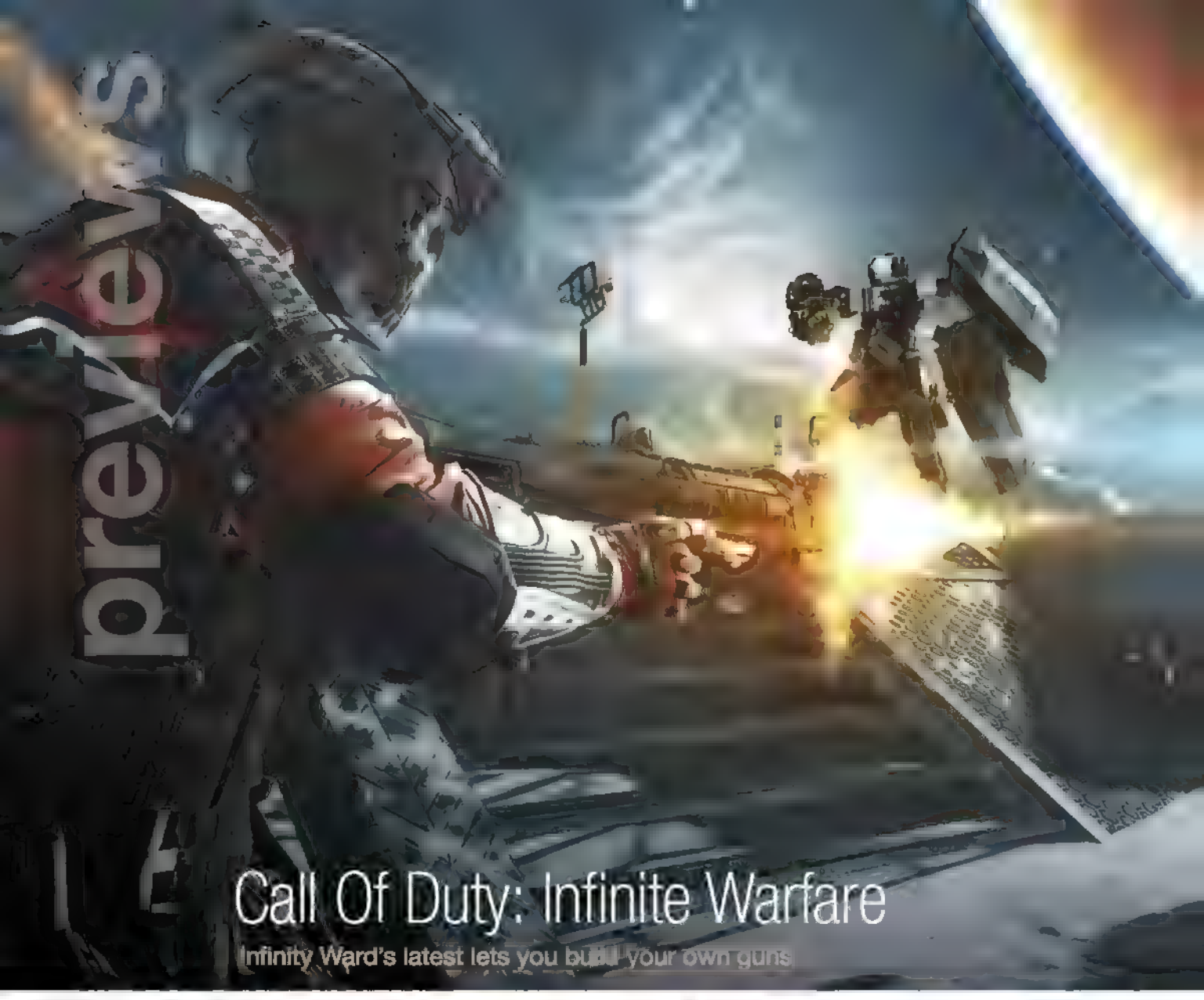
As game development ramps up toward release, South Park Studios is in the middle of its mad dash to create Season 20 of the iconic animated show. This means South Park's creators have less time to devote to the development of the game as it enters its final phase, but Ubisoft San Francisco insists Stone and Parker have remained hands-on with the project.

"They're always happy to compromise and talk through better ways to do things," Menzel says. "Their producers call it Sunday Trey, because they start producing the show on Thursday, and Thursday Trey is crazy and dreaming, and full of ideas. Sunday/Monday Trey is like, 'Just get it done. We just got to figure it out.' So depending on which Trey we get dictates how our meetings go."

All of Ubisoft's creative flexibility with the South Park team has come at a cost: time. The Fractured But Whole recently got delayed into the first quarter of 2017. The added time allows the studio to polish gameplay mechanics and squash as many bugs as it can find, but the team also sees this as an opportunity to squeeze out a few more jokes. Even now, Ubisoft San Francisco is ready to be flexible if South Park's creators come back with any last-minute narrative additions.

"Stick of Truth was a great game, and it was really funny, but for us, this game has to be better on pretty much every front," Schroeder says. "We're reaching a point where we could get this out, but will it give those guys enough time to get those fourth-iteration jokes in there? The more time we give those guys to iterate the better the game gets. We decided not to compromise on what I think is going to be the funniest game ever made."

For exclusive video interviews with the game's creators, a feature on what it's like to work with Matt Stone and Trey Parker, and a list of the team's favorite episodes, head to gameinformer.com/southparkfractured



Call Of Duty: Infinite Warfare

Infinity Ward's latest lets you build your own guns

» **Platforms**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Shooter
(18-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Activision

» **Developer**
Infinity Ward

» **Release**
November 4

Taking place further in the future than any game in the series, Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare wants to explore new ideas without making the game feel alien. The team at Infinity Ward has ideas to spare, but that doesn't mean they all fit the series. At this year's Call of Duty XP event, we got hands-on time with the competitive multiplayer, and while Infinity Ward isn't making too many drastic changes to it this year, most of its ideas seem like smart tweaks to the status quo.

"We run everything through [a] filter of what we feel should be in a Call of Duty game," says Infinite Warfare lead multiplayer designer Joe Cucot. "We didn't want Call of Duty to change its movement set significantly for the third year in a row."

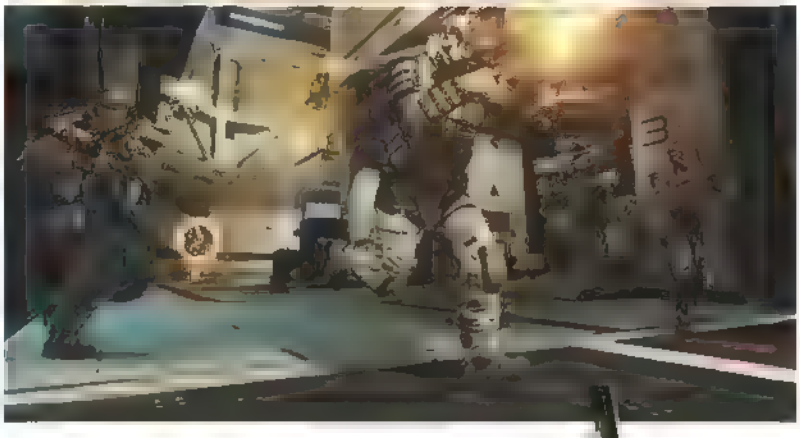
The powersliding and jetpacks from Call of Duty: Black Ops III return, making Infinite Warfare immediately familiar. I didn't mind the return of Black Ops III's mobility options; if anything, they feel more at home in a far-future setting.

Having that familiarity means Infinity Ward can focus on fine-tuning the details. For example, the class system from Black Ops III also returns, though the classes (called Rigs) are more distinct this time around. The Warfighter is a jack-of-all-trades soldier who can maintain his scorestreak between deaths, but his super weapon is a Y-shaped gun that fires ricochet ng bullets. Meanwhile, the robotic Synaptic can fire while sprinting and run on all fours to slash enemies, making it great for more aggressive pushes and close-quarter combat.

The new Tactical and Lethal equipment options let you mess around with some cool new toys while also re-introducing old favorites. The Black Hole Projector grenade sucks in nearby enemies and then explodes, but enemies can escape its pull if they sprint away. The Bio-Spike, meanwhile, works like Black Ops III's Combat Axe.

Infinity Ward isn't content just refining what its predecessors have done, however. As you level up you unlock more Rigs, guns, perks, and equipment. But you can also find salvage, which you can use to craft your own variant of any gun in the game. These prototype weapons range in rarity from common to epic and have unique looks, similar to Counter-Strike: Global Offensive's gun skins.

Prototype guns have their own perks, like highlighting enemies with low health. Creating bespoke weapons means a higher variety of player customization, but could also make the gap between the haves and have-nots much wider. That said, Cucot is confident gun perks won't completely break the game's competitive balance. "We try and make sure players start out with a pretty good base [of weapons]...you're going to have a nice set



of options, and I think you're going to be competitive," he says.

The team has tweaked gun perks so their bonuses are minor compared to what's available by ranking up. Although prototype guns have different rarities, rare guns don't always outperform common ones. "We have common weapons that are pretty badass," Cucot says. "We have a common sniper rifle that has unlimited hold breath as a gun perk, and that's pretty powerful for a sniper rifle."

I wasn't able to tinker with gun-crafting or prototype weapons at Call of Duty XP, but I played several matches of the new Defender mode, which feels like a cross between Hardpoint and Uplink. In this mode, two teams fight for a ball in the center of the map. When a player grabs hold of the ball, their team starts earning points at a steady rate. The ball only doles out points for a minute before returning to the center.

This gives the team without the ball some options: They can either attempt to chase the person holding the ball (who is always highlighted, as in Uplink), or hold down the center of the map and prepare for the next ball. In my matches, teams stuck to a mix of both, though as the clock on the ball counted down, everyone began clustering toward the center. It's a hectic mode, and while it might seem like a less serious one, I can see players taking it seriously once they start coordinating.

Infinite Warfare is also adding Mission Teams. Players can choose to play for one of four different mission teams which assign different missions every match; one team might assign missions based around killstreaks, while another focuses on capturing objectives. Completing these missions will earn you calling cards, titles, and prototype weapons. Mission Teams weren't in the build I played, but having a new goal separate from winning every match has the potential to result in players who play more selfishly at the expense of the team.

Still, after playing a couple of hours of Infinite Warfare, I'm interested in seeing how Infinity Ward's new ideas play out. The new weapons and Rig system add some bombast to the series' arsenal, and Defender feels like it coerces players to work together without being forceful. Prototype weapons are the biggest unknown. Despite Cucot's insistence to the contrary, they could end up being too powerful. Worse yet, they could end up as a needless addition that clutters up the game.

Though Cucot and the rest of Infinity Ward might not want to stray too far from what makes Call of Duty one of the most prominent series in video games, they have more than their fair share of ideas about where they want to take the series. After my brief time mixing it up in multiplayer, I may be along for the ride. ▪ **Suriel Vazquez**

Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare Remastered

Taunting now included

Platforms
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

Style
1-Player Shooter
(18-Player Online)

Publisher
Activision

Developer
Raven,
Certain Affinity,
Beenox

Release
November 4

Call of Duty: Modern Warfare Remastered debuts as a pack-in for the special editions of Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare, but demand for this particular remaster seems high enough that Activision might want to consider a standalone release.

At this year's Call of Duty XP event, the line to play Remastered was the longest by far. Even during the press-only showcase the day before the event, it seemed people wanted to revisit the Call of Duty series' most impactful entry before playing Infinite Warfare's multiplayer.

I couldn't help myself either. I played the original Modern Warfare for days on end back in 2007, and while the campaign was great in its own right, the way it revolutionized multiplayer is the reason the series has stuck around in its current form.

Luckily for the nostalgic, Modern Warfare holds up. It doesn't feel as intense or chaotic in light of more recent shooters, since you can only sprint and shoot while grounded. But those limited options make every path more deadly, since without the ability to sprint along walls or jetpack away, every chokepoint is more crowded.

And in the two hours I played Remastered, bullets felt more lethal than they have in recent games; shootouts seemed to end much more quickly, making it more imperative to get the jump on someone instead of facing them head-on.

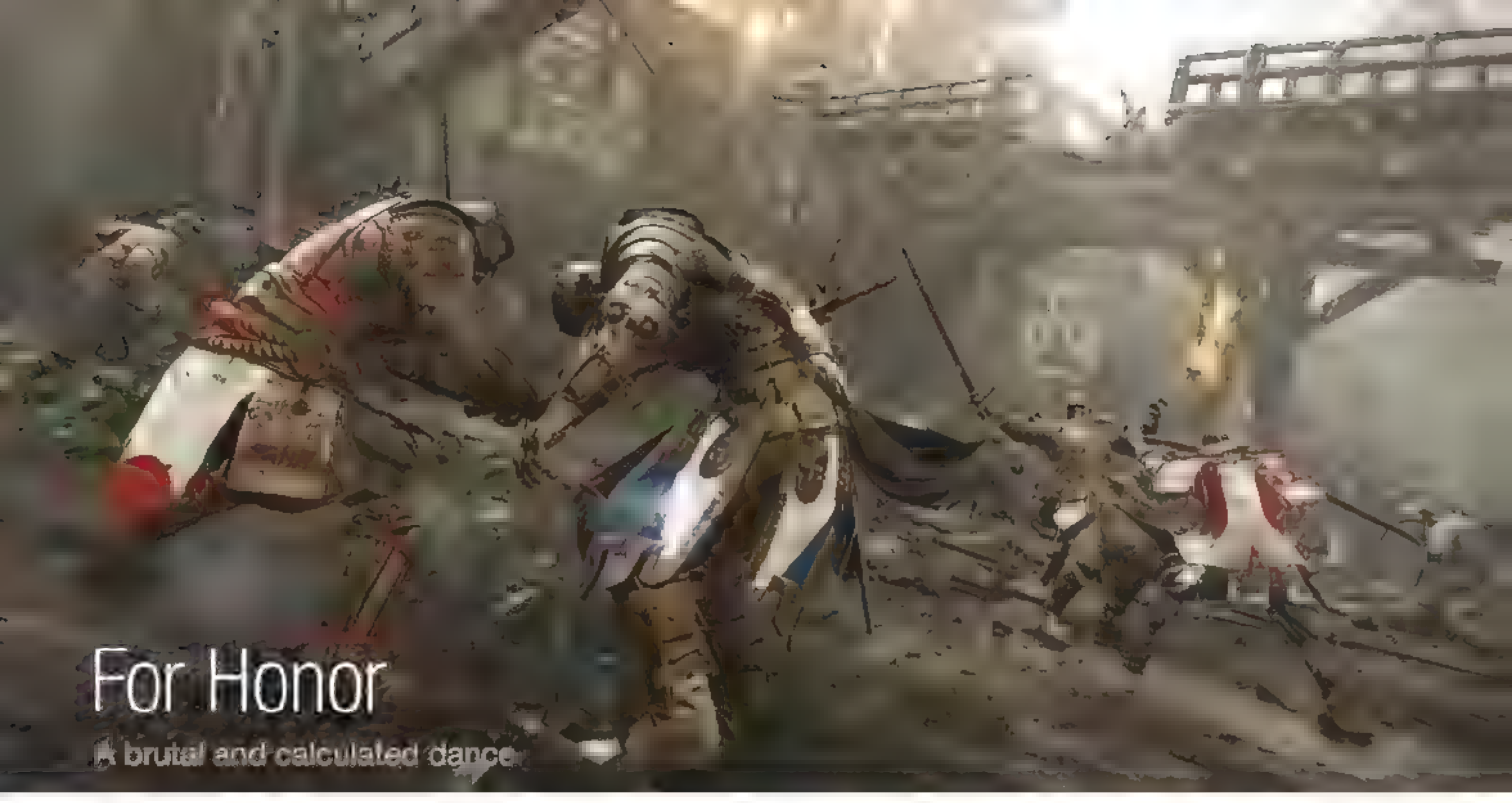
As familiar as Remastered feels, developers Raven, Certain Affinity, and Beenox have layered on a few new details to keep the game more in line with current series. Every multiplayer map has gotten a pass to make them more visually dense. If you're worried that means you won't recognize it, don't be; the bisected helicopter on the Crash map is as you remember it, albeit with a few more details to spruce up your old camping spot.

Voice samples have also been remastered, which was more obvious than the visual facelift. I've heard the line "Enemy UAV is online!" enough times to know the line sounds slightly different, though it hasn't been re-voiced. I'm not enough of an audiophile to have noticed much else in my time with the game, but I was aware many of the voice lines sounded slightly different, though not re-recorded.

Remastered sports some other interesting additions as well. The medals from recent games appear, meaning you'll get a "Revenge" and "Comeback" medal when you kill someone who has killed you and get a kill after dying several times, respectively.

You can also taunt by pressing down on the d-pad, which causes your soldier to inspect their gun. This will show up on killcams, which means if you land a great kill from afar, you can give your opponent a good look at the gun with which you killed them.

None of these changes affect gameplay, and I'm glad they don't. Who knows how long I'll stick with Remastered come release, but I want my time with it to recreate my memories as faithfully as possible. It might sound a little different, but the revamped look, medals, and familiar gameplay should make for a great history lesson. » **Suriel Vazquez**



For Honor

A brutal and calculated dance

For Honor garnered a lot of attention back when it was introduced at E3 2015, and for good reason. Truly great third-person melee combat games are hard to come by, and Ubisoft's take on the genre is promising. I had the opportunity to spend an hour playing through various multiplayer modes in For Honor at PAX West, and found the game to be a bone-crunching display of entertainment.

Admittedly, there is a rather sharp learning curve. I spent the first 30 minutes of my demo fumbling around, trying to understand when I needed to block enemy attackers and how to take advantage of openings. So much of For Honor is wrapped up in understanding your opponent's body language and predicting how they might react to your actions. This makes encounters with human-controlled enemies particularly challenging because of how unpredictable they can be.

Dominion was the mode I spent the most time with during my hands-on. The game mode is essentially a "hold the zone" variation of multiplayer in which you storm battlefields in search of control points where countless enemies are duking it out. In this way, Dominion is structured a lot like Dynasty Warriors, with you running around clearing easy-to-kill troops from various points to steal zones. However, things get a bit more complicated once the big hitters on the other team show up, whether they are controlled by humans or A.I. These stand-offs usually break down into a scenario where you and your opponent slowly circle each other, looking for openings while the A.I. troops around you do battle with one another. It's a gripping experience that recalls scenes from the likes of *Braveheart* and *The Last Samurai*. The only disappointment is when you're outnumbered by player-controlled opponents, as there is essentially no way to fend off both of them at once.

The other mode I spent time with was called Duel, and it is exactly what it sounds like – a 1v1 mode where you and your foe do battle. This is where For Honor truly shines, removing all the superfluous (but exciting) large-scale battle elements and focusing on its intricate combat system. I went up against one of the developers of the game on a rickety bridge and fought tooth and nail for my eventual match victory, which goes to whoever wins the best out of five rounds. It was an incredibly tense duel with us circling each other and madly flipping bumpers on our controllers so that our avatars' body movements were constantly shifting, with both of us trying to lure the other into making an attack that could be blocked and counterattacked.

By the end of the duel, my hands were actually clammy from how tense the experience felt.

I look forward to spending more time with For Honor when it's released. I'm especially curious about the game's single-player mode, which Ubisoft hasn't revealed much about, but according to the team at PAX it will be a "substantial" and not "tacked-on" campaign. We'll find out the merit to those claims come February. » **Javy Gwaltney**

» [redacted]
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

» [redacted]
1-Player Action
(8-Player Online)

» [redacted]
Ubisoft

» **Developer**
Ubisoft Montreal

» **Release**
February 14

The Last Guardian

A beautiful struggle

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Sony Interactive Entertainment

» **Developer**
SIE Japan Studio/ genDesign

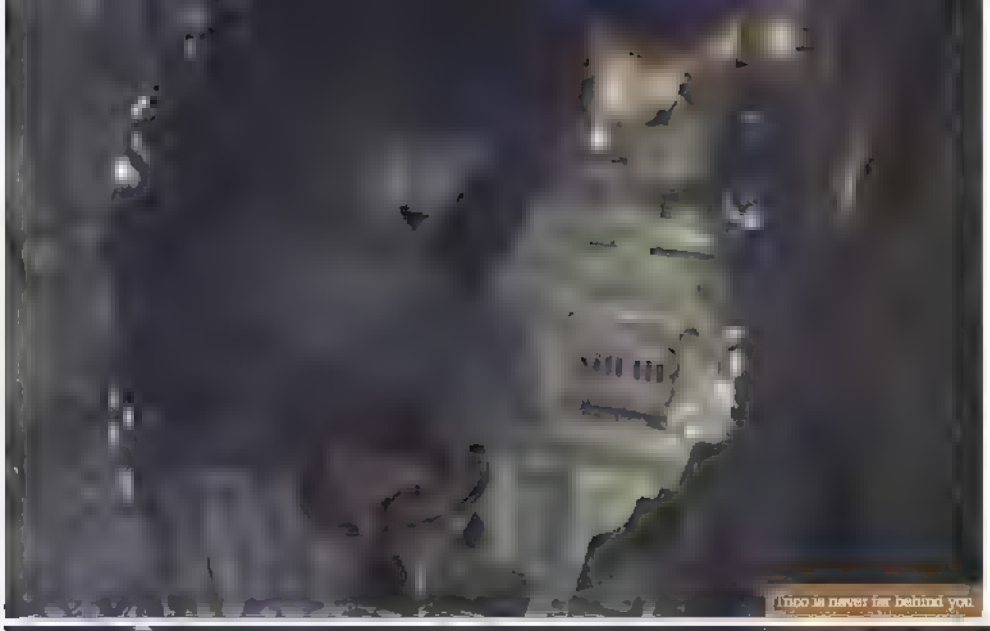
» **Release**
December 6

It's said patience is a virtue...and The Last Guardian has made its fans incredibly virtuous. The game has been in development for nearly a decade, and just when a release date was set at this past E3, a recent delay to December 6 is making gamers wait just a little longer. I recently went hands-on with the game at a Sony event in Japan. Fittingly, I discovered a game experience that also requires patience, but not in a frustrating way. Instead, it's more serene as you slowly discover how to get around in this strange world with your only ally, a mammoth beast. The Last Guardian isn't a game you tear through without a second thought, and that's what makes it special.

If you're familiar with director Fumito Ueda's work (Ico, Shadow of the Colossus), you know he has a minimalist approach to the storytelling; it's up to you to discover what's at stake. Only small voiceover narration occurs throughout the game, and it's usually only to give you hints or add a little detail to the situation at hand. In The Last Guardian, you play as a young boy who wakes up next to a legendary creature named Trico. Trico is half-bird, half-mammal and is a sight to behold. Your eyes can't help but be drawn to Trico as he moves around an ancient ruin. Trico often provides you clues as to where you should go next by interacting with the environment. In my demo, he starts pawing at a chain hanging from above, which I immediately climb on in hopes I can open the gate in front of me to progress.

The Last Guardian is a good mix of platforming and puzzle solving. I jump on high edges to find levers or items integral to getting to the next area. I press R1 to call Trico to my side, using him as a way to jump to high points and also as a cushion when I need to get down. The controls take getting used to; they're much more responsive and fluid than in Team Ico's past games, but it's hard to train your brain to use triangle to jump, and pointing Trico to an area of interest using the camera and holding two buttons at once can be tricky. Positioning the camera is more effort than it should be: quickly becoming the most frustrating part of my demo. It didn't make me want to stop playing, but it is an element I hope gets improved before release.

Trico is an animal and he acts like one. Sometimes when you call him, he comes straight to you; other times he's distracted by other things in the



Trico is never far behind you.

The gorgeous visuals add to the experience.

environment and you need to keep calling him. Another issue I encountered during the demo was triggering Trico to come my way and help out consistently. You need to be patient, and sometimes it requires multiple requests or certain positioning to get him to come to your aid. Still, every time Trico comes my way, he astonishes me with his presence. Climbing up and staying on his back as he takes me to new places is always exciting.

The best moments come when things get dire. In one portion of my demo, the ground starts crumbling and I have seconds before I fall to my death. I see Trico on the other side of me on a strong structure. The jump looks tricky. Can I make it to him? I get a running start and take a death-defying leap. It looks like I might have misjudged as I barely miss Trico and the platform. I quickly descend, and just when I think I'm a goner, Trico's tail comes swinging my way – sweeping me up in the nick of time. These intense moments are a rush. Something about controlling the young boy always makes you feel like you're in danger or powerless against the obstacles in front of you. Every success feels satisfying because of this, even if Trico comes in to save the day, because you're still the brains behind the operation.

During my demo, I also notice Trico is fearful of certain things. Some stained glass windows have creepy eyes painted on them, and Trico won't move forward if he sees them. I find rubble on the ground and hurl it to smash them. These eyes appear again not too far away, but this time they're tied down on big structures. Throwing an object won't reach them or be enough to take them down. I must push mining carts off ledges to bring them down, using Trico to help me as the platforms break before me.

This world is dangerous yet beautiful. Solutions are around every corner. Most of them involve Trico to some degree, but often he's helping you as much as you're helping him. For instance, at one point I push a huge barrel off a ledge as a way to prop open a gate so Trico can get through. I feel a sense of accomplishment when I figure out ways to get through every plight, and Trico is there at every turn. As you fly through the air on his back, it's just like echoes of Atreyu riding Falcor in *The Neverending Story*. I can already tell this is the start of something special, and can't wait to see what's in store when I can play the entire game.
» **Kimberley Wallace**

Birthdays The Beginning

Evolving life by altering the land

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4 • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Simulation

» **Publisher**
NIS America

» **Developer**
Arc System Works

» **Release**
2017

Yasuhiro Wada is best known as the creator of the Harvest Moon series. He has since branched off from it, and his latest project has the working title Birthdays the Beginning. In it, you manipulate the environment to evolve different organisms, from plants to mammals. Wada gave me a demo of Birthdays at the Tokyo Game Show, and so far it's shaping up to be an intriguing simulation.

Wada was inspired by games like SimCity and SimEarth, but he formed the core idea from a popular Japanese anime character named Doraemon, who gets an "earth spray" that gives him the power to create lifeforms. Wada thought it would be an interesting concept for a game if you acted as a god, altering the world and seeing the chain reactions in its evolution.

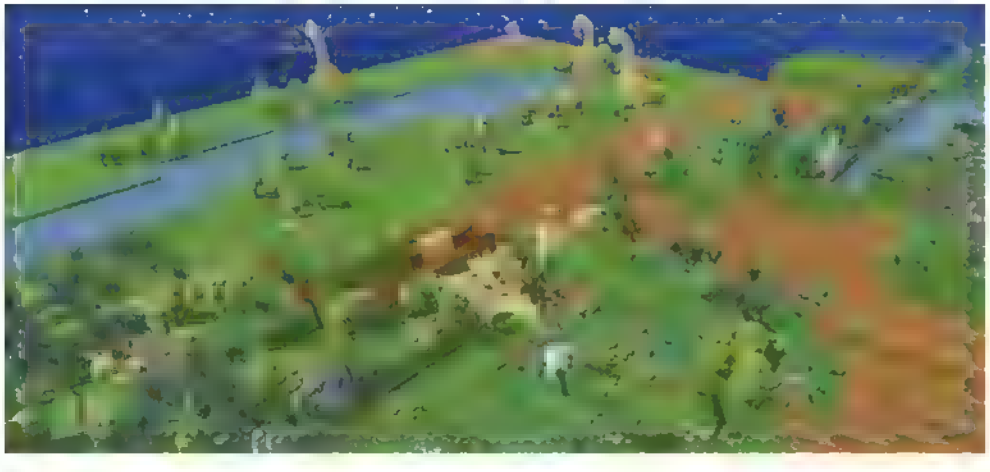
The main gameplay mechanic is simple: You raise and lower land, affecting its temperature and climate. This alters the types of organisms that evolve in it. Map sizes steadily grow, testing how far you can take your god-like powers. Every time you change something, you can pass time to see the effect it's having on the environment, such as if it's adding more food resources to grow the population or allowing new organisms to evolve.

You level up by capturing your creations, which conveys a Pokémon-style "gotta catch 'em all" feeling. You can create a wide range of creatures, including flowers, jellyfish, dinosaurs, cavemen, and beyond. During my demo, I saw monkeys, elephants, a T. rex, and humans in adorable forms. Clicking on any organism, you can see a letter grade for its skills, representing everything from reproducibility to how much food must be around for it to survive. Every creature also has a rarity rating.

Wada said he tried for some realism by representing different eras in the evolutionary timeline based on scientific theories. However, if you alter the conditions, you can have species who normally wouldn't coexist living together, such as humans and dinosaurs. Every being has certain conditions it needs to sustain life, and if your land doesn't provide it, the being dies.

While making the game, Wada thought about real-life issues such as global warming and how it affects life forms, so plants can affect the temperature and sustainability of in-game environments. However, the creatures you breed simply exist in the world – they don't alter the landscape. Right now there are 300 organisms in the game, but it's nearly impossible to create them all at the same time on one map.

Birthdays' hook comes from watching your vacant lands grow just by the raising and lowering of the terrain. It's such a simple tactic, yet requires you to pay attention to the effects. At one point, Wada showed us a map with tons of creatures and cavemen on it. As he advanced time, the cavemen soon were building more and more huts and taking over the land. Just seeing the world you can build and sustain is exciting, especially watching it populate before you. » **Kimberley Wallace**



Pokémon Sun And Moon

Exploring new territory

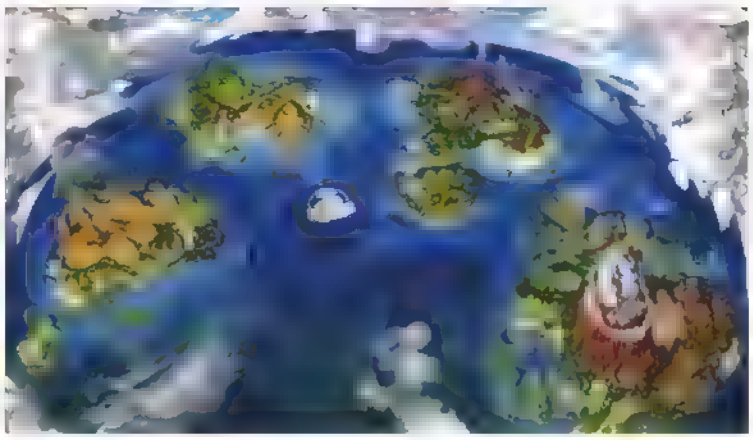
Pokémon has seen many changes over the years, and that trend continues as players head to the islands of Alola this winter. Whether you're looking at new takes on classic Pokémon or the "no-gym" style missions that challenge players both in combat and in the world, the sleek stylings of Pokémon have never looked as good as they do in Sun and Moon.

Going hands on with Pokémon Sun, I took on a few initial trainer encounters and searched the tall grass for some new allies. Using the clowny water starter Popplio, I battled some bird and insect Pokémon, a classic start to a Pokémon title. The trainer fights are more interesting graphically, as each one opens with a flashy intro screen that highlights the combatant. I could have easily avoided the trainer encounters as well by moving through the environment, sneaking behind rocks or along grassy trails to avoid being seen by the trainers. A warning appears on the screen when you're a few steps away from a trainer encounter, letting you prepare for the battle or take a different route. The fights are graphically elaborate as well, showing off characters in the background and adding a good deal of life to the traditional Pokémon template.

One of the handiest features in Pokémon Sun and Moon is that once you've determined a Pokémon's weaknesses, they will always be "known" on your move list, so you won't have to remember it all in your head. Your abilities are tagged with indicator text, letting you know when something is going to be super effective or weak against a certain Pokémon. This gives players an edge each time they start a fight. Pokémon can also learn "Z-moves" for the first time ever in the franchise, abilities so powerful that they can only be used once during each battle.

The "go to an area and take on the gym leader to get your badge and move on" design is altered in Sun and Moon, instead focusing on island challenges that involve more than simply taking on a roster of trainers and their Pokémon. If you're a fan of the big battles with elite trainers though, have no fear. You still face off against a variety of powerful gym-leader equivalents – they just probably won't be the only thing you have to do to finish off an area.

Pokémon Sun and Moon's fresh visuals, new Pokémon, and updated mechanics are poised to entertain franchise veterans, as well as a new influx of Poké-fans from the recent Pokémon Go phenomenon. ▪ **Daniel Tack**



3DS

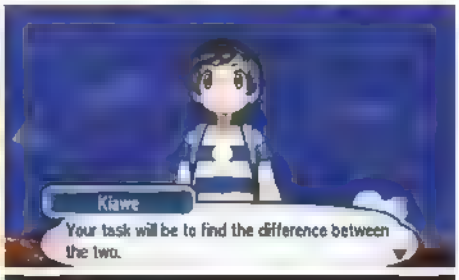
Style
1-Player Role-Playing

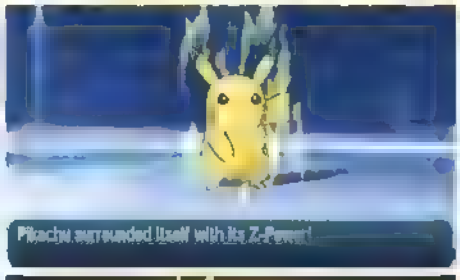
The Pokémon Company

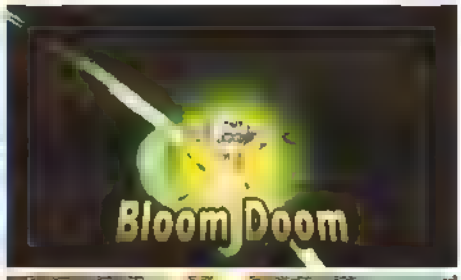
Developer
Game Freak

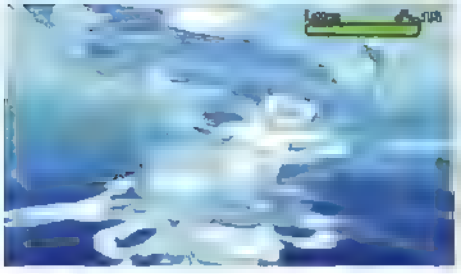
November 18

Island trials may be more complicated than simply defeating a tough trainer.
Mallow
I'm gonna need you to find four ingredients for me!



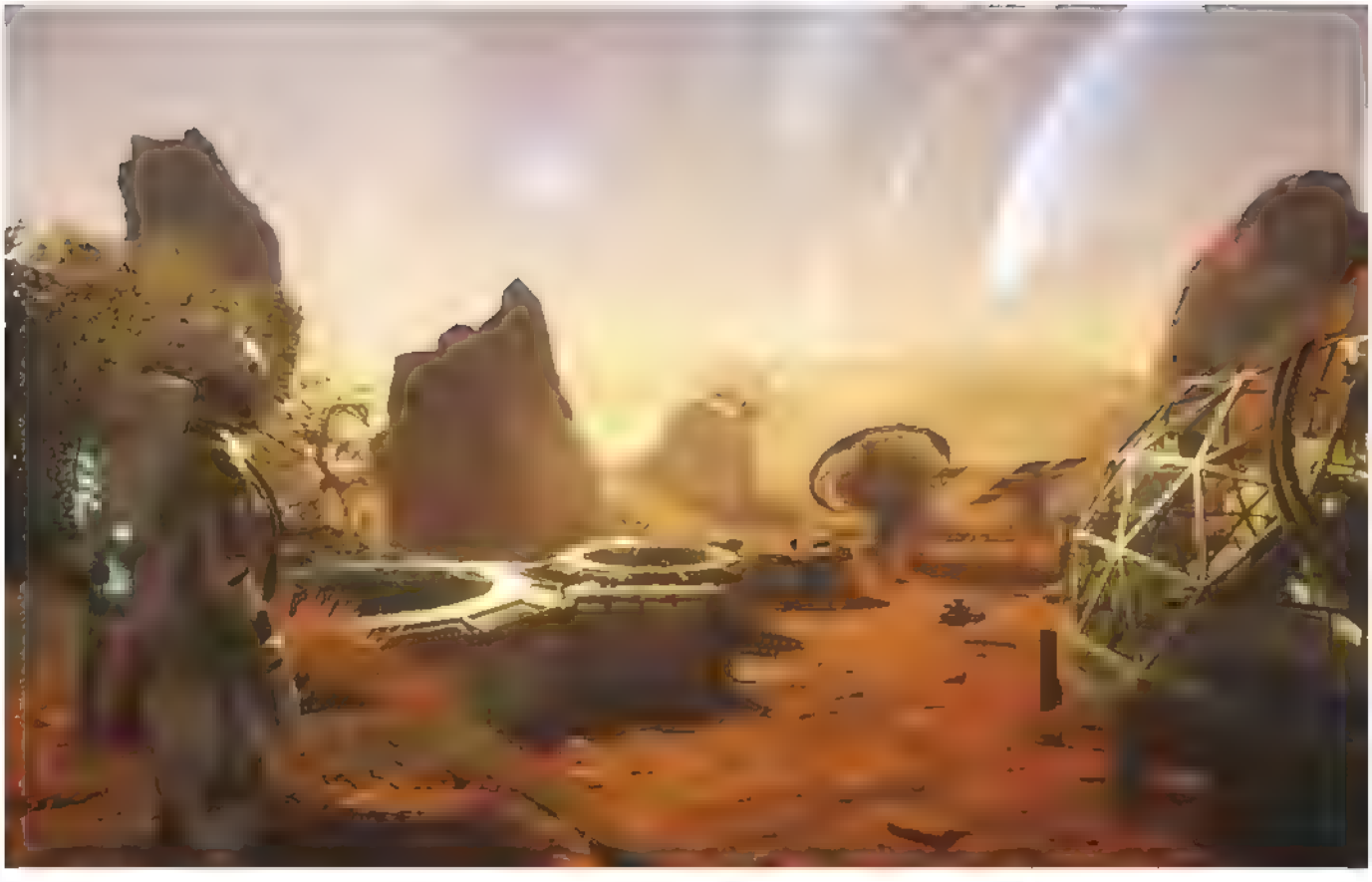






Osiris: New Dawn

The sky you're looking for



» **Platforms**
PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action
(Online TBA)

» **Publisher**
Fenix Fire

» **Developer**
Fenix Fire

» **Release**
2017

Last month, No Man's Sky launched, and while many players found the procedurally generated galaxies of the game filled with wonders and delights, others felt understandably underwhelmed by the hollowness of the universe and the lack of a human touch. Osiris: New Dawn, a PC game being developed by former Blizzard and Double Helix Entertainment developers, might be just the sci-fi fix for those left wanting by No Man's Sky

The two games share many of the same conceits: you're an explorer in a large universe. You begin each game having crash landed on a mysterious planet. The difference is that where No Man's Sky is fueled by algorithms and chance, planets and environments in Osiris, according to developer Brian McRae, have been crafted and meticulously designed.

"We want the player to know what they're getting into," McRae told me as I played a brief demo of the first planet What they're getting into is a game heavily inspired by *The Martian*. I spent the first 20 minutes of the demo wandering around a surface similar to Mars, collecting materials to build bio domes and repairing a crack in my helmet visor with duct tape. Environments are beautiful, with the sun shining down on the surface, revealing giant centipede-like monsters I am forced to fight off with the aid of a handy drone.

Players are also able to create vehicles that let them zoom around the planet. McRae quickly brought one into my world that was a giant speeder bike equipped with dual laser cannons. I zoomed around the planet for a few minutes, watching the names of various locations pop up as I blasted monsters. During my joyride I hit enough rocks to cause some damage to the vehicle, so McRae made me pull over and get out to inspect the bike. There was no bar that told me how damaged the vehicle was, but I could see a crumpled engine and some dents here and there. I equipped my repair tool and had to specifically target every damaged section of the bike to repair the whole thing. I liked this, as it provided a sense of intimacy attached to what's usually a dumb, laborious process. I was still pointing my repair tool at a vehicle and holding a button until the thing was repaired, but making me actually look for where I needed to use the tool is memorable and makes the experience more interesting than it would be otherwise. Osiris is filled with nice little touches like these, and they go a long way toward making the experience unique. During our demo, McRae confirmed multiplayer would be part of the game eventually but did not go into specifics about what would be included in online modes.

The game hits Steam Early Access later this month and might just be the ticket for those disappointed by other recent opportunities to explore outer space. » **Javy Gwaltney**

Toejam And Earl: Back In The Groove

Hardcore wack

The original Toejam and Earl was released way back in 1991 as an exclusive for the Sega Genesis The game was one of the earliest console roguelikes, released well before Spelunky and FTL led a resurgence of the genre. Though sequels to Toejam and Earl would trade the roguelike elements for platforming action, the Kickstarter-funded Back In the Groove looks to emulate the first game. In Back In the Groove, you play as two aliens trying to rebuild their spaceship bit by bit, collecting pieces littered around levels, and each one presented as a floating platform. The problem is these platforms are guarded by a variety of NPCs who try and bump you back down to the previous level if they catch you

There's little combat to speak of; instead, you sneak past foes. Power-ups appear on every platform as presents, and it's always a crapshoot what you're going to unwrap. Sometimes it might be a pair of wings that lets you zoom around each level briefly. Other times it might be an item that damages your health.

From the brief snippet of time I spent with Back In the Groove at PAX, I found it to be an engaging and surprisingly colorful roguelike, even as someone who didn't play the original game. The core experience is solid enough that it can get by on its own sturdy high-risk, high-reward design, and exist as a fun game rather than just a nostalgia grab. The game is slated to release next year, and as a roguelike fan, I'm excited to get my hands on it again

» Javy Gwaltney

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Adult Swim Games

» **Developer**
Humannature Studios

» **Release**
2017

FULL SAIL UNIVERSITY | fullsail.edu/gomeinformer

GRADS MAKING GAMES

Full Sail has specialized degree programs designed to help you gain the skill set and knowledge needed to pursue a career involving the design, computer languages, or art and animation with in video games

Our grads have worked on projects such as ***Destiny, Titanfall, Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare,*** and ***Far Cry 4.*** Grads have also worked for notable companies such as **Electronic Arts, Infinity Ward, ESPN,** and **Rockstar Games.**

3300 University Boulevard • Winter Park, FL

Financial aid available for those who qualify • Career development assistance • Accredited

Student work by: John Rogales & George Stoll

Divinity: Original Sin 2

Building upon a bold original

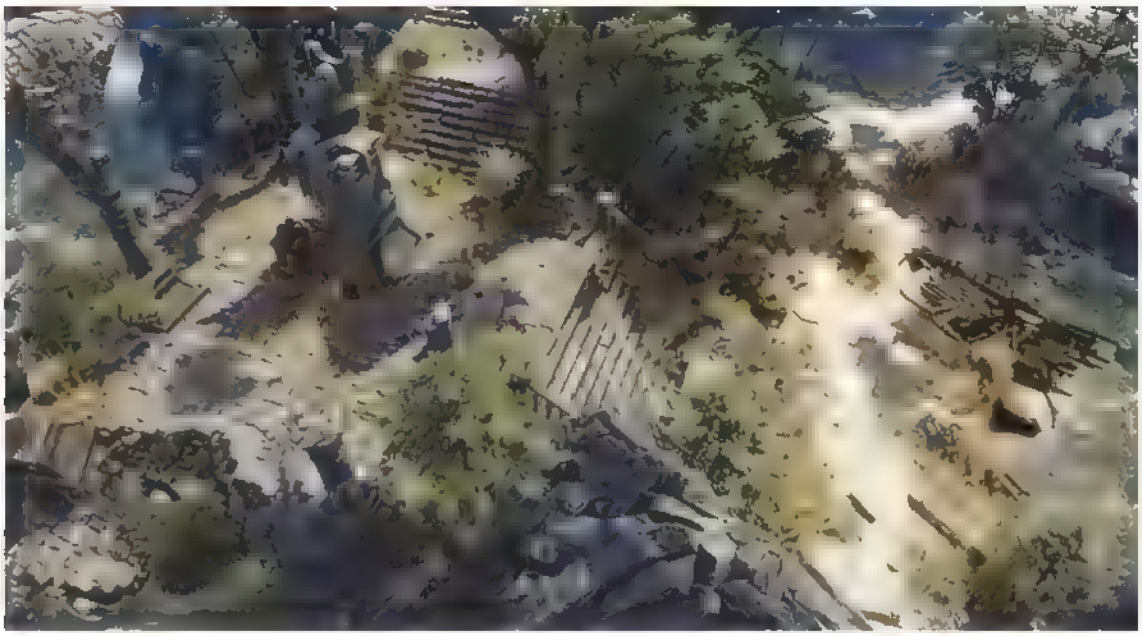
» Platforms
PC

» Style
1-Player Role-Playing
(4-Player Online)

» Publisher
Larian Studios

» Developer
Larian Studios

» Release
2017



Divinity: Original Sin surprised us with its strategic combat, free-form world where you can kill or befriend anything or anyone at your whim, challenging encounters, and multiple ways to solve quests. With Divinity: Original Sin 2, all that great stuff returns, with additional mechanics and a dedicated PvP mode for players to blow off some steam between spider slaughtering and razing peaceful NPC villages to the ground.

Co-op was sort of a footnote in the original title, where you could play with one other player. Now, up to four players can get together to take on the challenges of the world (or kill each other outright or via deception, up to and including poisoning an ally's healing potion so that they will imbibe a lethal swallow in the thick of combat). Competitive quests facilitate this, so you may be rewarded for messing with and murdering your friends.

The addition of source powers lets players build up to incredible "ultimate" abilities, so whether you want to be a burly warrior, deceptive rogue, or wily wizard, you have powerful abilities to work toward acquiring. Resources that power these abilities are scarce, so picking the optimal moment to unleash a meteor shower is a critical aspect players must weave into their tactical strategies. All of the crazy elemental interactions return, so throwing fire on poison or electricity on water creates all kinds of chaos. Larian is adding two more attributes that can be mixed and fused with the classic combinations – blessings and curses – so you can create everything from blessed pools that impart bonuses and benefits to cursed poison clouds that asphyxiate everything in their wake.

In addition to a robust campaign experience, Divinity: Original Sin 2 adds an arena mode to the mix, where players can participate in straight-up PvP combat with the turn-based tactical system. The demo we played forced us into cookie-cutter archetypes, but the mode is expected to get a number of tweaks and options before the game launches. The tiny arenas feature explosive barrels and source pools for charging your powerful abilities. Verticality is a critical element, and those who claim the high ground enjoy a damage boost and increased range on their attacks.

If you're interested in what's shaping up to be another amazing RPG, Divinity: Original Sin 2 is available in Early Access on Steam now, with full release hitting next year. » **Daniel Tack**

Torment: Tides Of Numenera

An ambitious port

Torment: Tides of Numenera has emerged as one of the most anticipated RPGs of the last few years, especially for those who grew up with complex isometric games like Baldur's Gate, Arcanum: Of Steamworks and Magick Obscura, and Planescape Torment, the game to which it is a spiritual successor. However, I was curious exactly how inXile was going to handle the proposed console port of a game with such an intricate interface that includes inventory management, detailed action selection, and reading through tons of text. The answer: surprisingly well.

I watched a one-hour demo of the Xbox One version during PAX, and the controls were unexpectedly fluid, with the demoer switching between actions and dialogue options on the fly. The demo also showed off two new areas of the game. The first was a disgusting, pus-ridden area that had been taken over by some kind of lifeform called The Maw. Our band of heroes walked around the area and talked to some NPCs. The demoer pointed at a crashed subway car and explained how, if we went inside it, we would be confronted by an A.I. who would tell us the story of how the car crashed into the Maw, killing everyone on board, and how it felt guilt for letting them all die.

After that, we crossed through a gooey, bloody portal onto a broken space station populated by a religious cult that lives out its days waiting for a starship to come and take them away. The demoer explained that we needed to steal an item from there. As is often the case with this genre, there are a number of options that we can explore to accomplish our goal. He chose to break down the door in front of the guard (oops), creating a combat scenario. Fighting is entertaining, with characters in the party casting spells that let them briefly control enemies, and plenty of punches to go around.

Those who want to play Torment: Tides of Numenera, but don't have a PC or want to play it on a console can rest easy. So far, the console edition (at least on Xbox One) runs smoothly and the controls are intuitive. Torment's new areas also showcased the inventiveness I've come to expect from it as the game dives even further into a compelling realm of grotesque, fantastical weirdness. » **Javy Gwaltney**

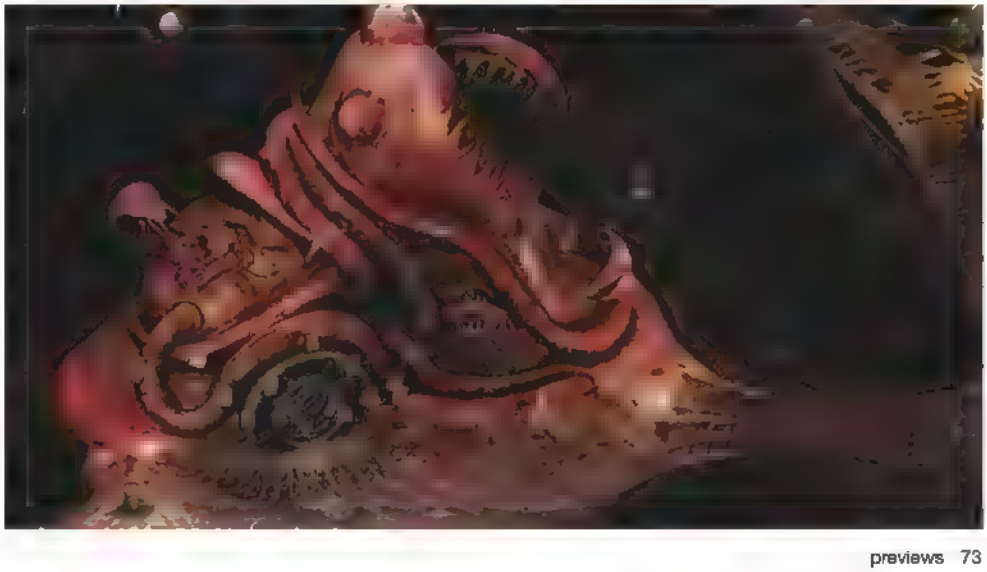
» [redacted]
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

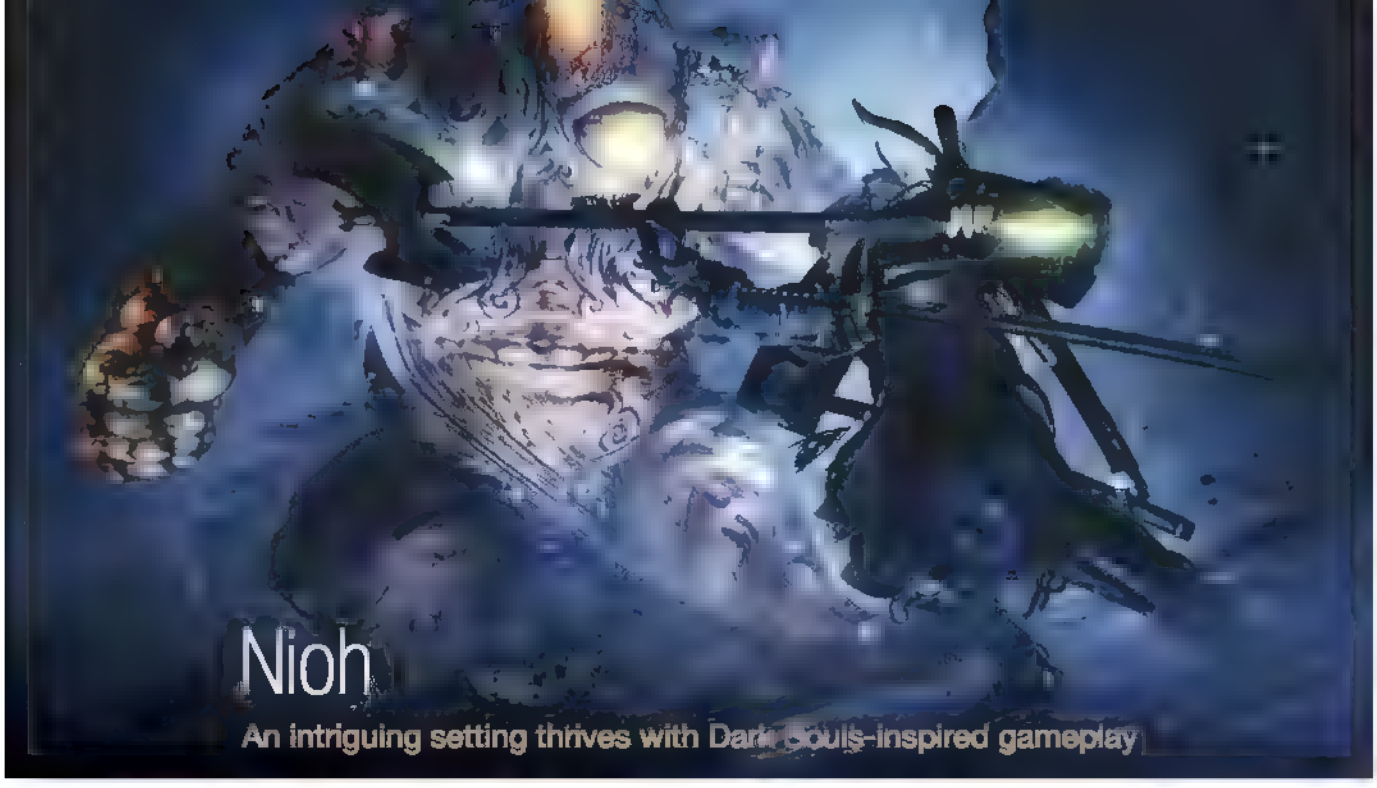
» [redacted]
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Techland

» **Developer**
inXile

» [redacted]
2017





Nioh

An intriguing setting thrives with Dark Souls-inspired gameplay

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4

» **Style**
1-Player Action/
Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Koei Tecmo

» **Developer**
Team Ninja

» **Release**
February 9

To say Nioh has had a long development history is an understatement; it's nearing a decade now, with various teams from Omega Force to Team Ninja touching the project. Team Ninja stayed on the game after entirely rebooting its first attempt, which was too much like its previous work on Ninja Gaiden and not enough like an action/RPG. Since then, the game has been revamped with the genre in mind, and Team Ninja takes inspiration from Dark Souls to create a challenging-yet-fun game that places you in the shoes of an Irish samurai named William during Japan's 17th-century Edo period. I recently went hands-on with a new demo for Tokyo Game Show and enjoyed what I played.

The setting for Nioh is one of its biggest highlights. The game takes place during the Battle of Sekigahara – one of the biggest skirmishes in Japanese history. Throughout the game, you fight or cooperate with various generals, such as Ieyasu Tokugawa, who participated in the battle. In addition, you face off against spirits that take on various forms, from human to animalistic. The demo I played took me to a snowy field swarming with enemies; I fought everything from animated skeleton soldiers to beautiful spiritual beings out for blood.

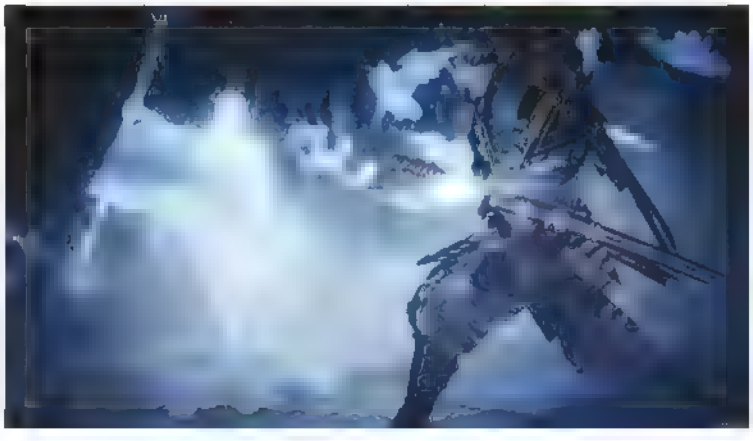
I died five times during the 20-minute demo, but never once did I become frustrated. Nioh takes the Dark Souls approach of learning through death, and that works to its benefit. My first instinct was to dive into the action, blocking and slashing at the enemy using strong and weak attacks. However, I soon found one overzealous move can cost you everything. Once an enemy pulls off more than one hit on you, it's hard to come back from their combo, especially if they hit you hard enough to knock you on your back. Using your bow can be a godsend, especially if you can line up a headshot before a foe sees you. Bombs also give you an edge when starting confrontations. The best strategy is to study enemy patterns and never attempt more than a few hits before rolling away.

If at any time you need a change of pace, you can change your weapon or stance. If you want to be agile and evasive, a low stance is your best bet. If you want to be aggressive, a high stance allows you to cause more damage, but you are also more vulnerable. You can also take a middle stance which strikes a happy balance between the two. I found the high stance best for executing fatal combos.

After learning the ropes, I made it to a boss battle with a vicious ice maiden named Yuki-Anna. Yuki-Anna has a variety of attacks, including some vicious ranged ones, such as her ice breath and ice pillars that erupt through the ground. She has two health bars, so expect a battle of attrition. However, if you get her health bar into the purple zone, she takes more damage. Wearing her down to that point takes plenty of patience, and is no easy feat as her attacks also deal high damage. As soon as I get knocked on my back during our showdown she unleashes an onslaught of attacks, quickly leading to my death. If you die you lose your experience, but you can go back and collect it on the battlefield on your next attempt, just like Dark Souls.

I fell into a good rhythm of discovery and achievement during my time with Nioh. The learning curve seems just right, and I was always eager to get back on the battlefield and try again. It may ape the Souls series, but its setting and combat provide plenty of fun.

– **Kimberley Wallace**



Super Mario Maker

Creating on the go

When Super Mario Maker released on Wii U last year, the community embraced the flexible and intuitive creation tools and the title became one of the biggest reasons to own a Wii U. Nintendo is now bringing that title to 3DS for players to create, play, and share on the go.

Going into Super Mario Maker on 3DS, you should be aware of some key changes. The biggest limitation is that the sharing aspect of the game is now focused on local players. Gone is the ability to upload your courses to other players online. Instead, if you're connected to the internet, you can play randomized courses uploaded from the Wii U version through modes like the 100-Mario Challenge and "Recommended Courses." However, the Course ID system from Wii U is gone, meaning you can't search for a specific stage, which is disappointing.

One of the biggest draws of Super Mario Maker is sharing your stages with friends, and in lieu of using the Course ID system, Nintendo lets you share courses via local wireless and StreetPass. In addition, players can also share incomplete courses locally in order to collaborate with friends.

When you go in to create your level, Nintendo has included every creation component from the Wii U version with one key exception: the Mystery Mushroom. That power-up, which allows 8-bit Mario to dress up in costumes of other characters, is excluded from the creation suite in the 3DS version.

In addition to the 100 Nintendo-created courses that ship with this version, stages now have medal objectives that reward players for such feats as collecting all coins in the stage or defeating all enemies. I'm hopeful that the new additions breathe life into existing stages and add new ways to interact with friends, and make up for the limitations in this new portable version of one of my favorite Wii U releases.

» **Brian Shea**

» **Platform**
3DS

» **Style**
1-Player Platforming

» **Publisher**
Nintendo

» **Developer**
Nintendo

» **Release**
December 2

POWER UP REWARDS MEMBERS**

GET READY FOR ADVENTURE

YOU COULD WIN:
- Roundtrip air transportation for 2 people to San Francisco
- 3 nights hotel stay
- 1-day visit to Crystal Dynamics Studio
- SF city tour
- SF helicopter and Alcatraz Tour
- Private archery lessons
- $5,000 in spending cash

THREE WAYS TO ENTER**

- **Pre-order** Rise of the Tomb Raider: 20 Year Celebration on PS4 for **2 entries***
- **Purchase** Rise of the Tomb Raider: 20 Year Celebration on PS4 in-store or online for **2 entries***
- **Use 200 points** to enter at **www.PowerUpRewards.com for 1 entry**

Sweepstakes open **10/1/16 - 10/31/16**

Visit **PowerUpRewards.com** for entry and complete details.

GameStop POWERUP REWARDS

CRYSTAL DYNAMICS PS4 SQUARE ENIX

*Must pre-order/purchase using your PowerUp Rewards Membership Card
**NO PURCHASE NECESSARY TO ENTER OR WIN IN THE "GAMESTOP® POWERUP REWARDS™ RISE OF THE TOMB RAIDER: 20 YEAR CELEBRATION SWEEPSTAKES" Open to legal residents of the 48 contiguous US & DC, 18 or older. Void in AK, HI, American Samoa, Guam, Northern Mariana Islands, PR & US Virgin Islands and where prohibited. Sweepstakes starts 10/1/16 and ends 10/31/16. For Official Rules, which govern, and details on how to enter without purchase or PowerUp Rewards account, visit www.poweruprewards.com. Sponsor: GameStop, Inc., 625 Westport Pkwy, Grapevine, TX 76051

reviews

gamerinformer
GAME OF THE MONTH

80 NBA 2K17

Whether you love basketball or not, if you want to see the apex of modern sports simulations this is the game to buy. The television-style presentation, gameplay, and deep variety of game modes combine to offer a best-in-class suite no other sports title can match.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.
5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
1	Your ex-workers' opinions.

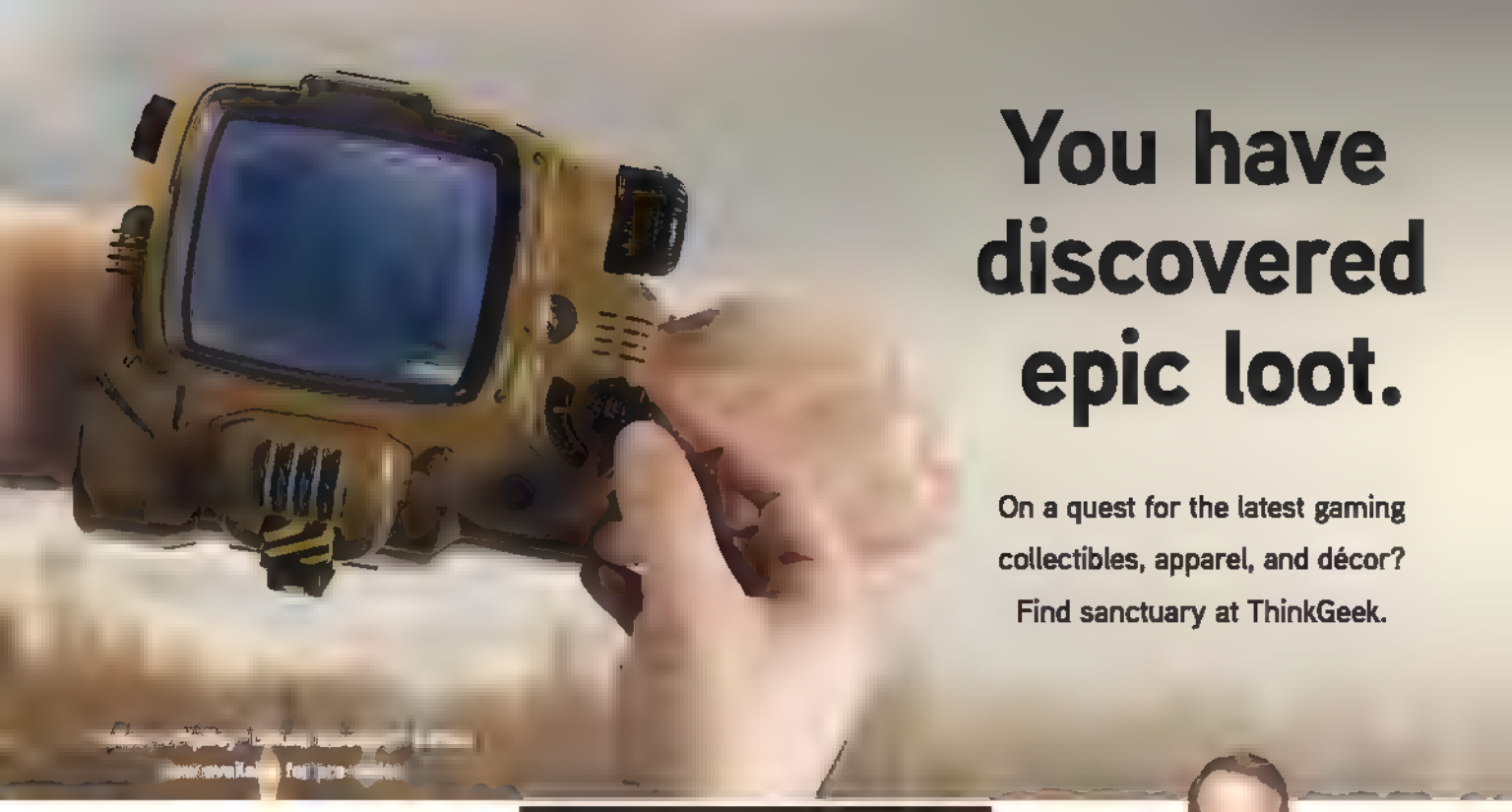
AWARDS

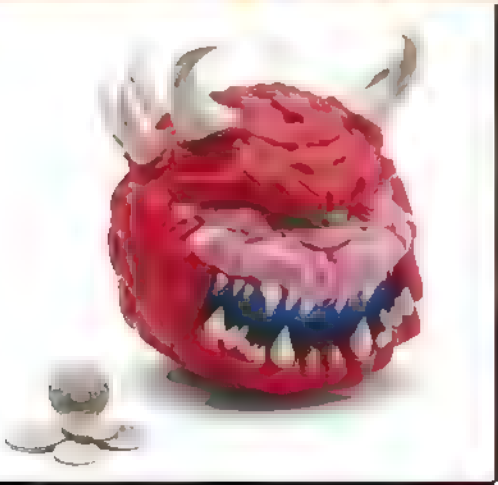
gamerinformer PLATINUM	Awarded to games that score between 9.75 and 10
gamerinformer GOLD	Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5
gamerinformer SILVER	Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75
gamerinformer GAME OF THE MONTH	The award for the most outstanding game in the issue

For more information on the age classification ratings in our reviews, head to gameinformer.com/ratings

You have discovered epic loot.

On a quest for the latest gaming collectibles, apparel, and décor? Find sanctuary at ThinkGeek.





COOL STUFF AND COLLECTIBLES FOR GAMING, SCI-FI & MORE.

Visit us at thinkgeek.com/gameinformer

THINKGEEK

JOIN IN. GEEK OUT.®

Destiny: Rise Of Iron

Evolution and expansion over reinvention

8.5

gamesformer SILVER

Style Online Multiplayer Shooter **Publisher** Activision **Developer** Bungie **Release** September 20 **Rating** T

PS4 • Xbox One

» Concept
Uncover the tragic story of the Iron Lords and guard against a resurgent threat facing Earth's final bastion

» Graphics
Destiny remains an alluring artistic success, though some of this new content is refurbished from existing areas and objects

» Sound
Rise of Iron has a stellar score, with triumphant battle hymns and wistful laments

» Playability
The latest balance patch continues to tweak the sandbox, shotguns and other short-range tactics currently rule the roost in Crucible

» Entertainment
With each expansion, Destiny grows in depth and replayability, Rise of Iron focuses on player choice in what each individual might enjoy

» Replay Value
High

Any new expansion to Destiny must enrich an already-complex play environment, while simultaneously introducing activities that meet the desires of longtime players and curious new Guardians. Rise of Iron confronts these goals head-on, and while a few problems crop up, it is an admirable success in its own right. More importantly, it continues to evolve Bungie's grand epic and provides an integrated experience of competitive and cooperative shooting unmatched in the current gaming landscape.

The early days of Destiny hinted at an Arthurian order of knights that predate the player heroes, and Rise of Iron finally pulls back the curtain on that legend. Situated on a suitably lofty social space atop a wolf-inhabited mountain, the stoic Lord Saladin is a lonely survivor of those days, and he takes center stage as players confront the danger that once destroyed the mighty Iron Lords. The campaign that follows is tight and personal, focused on nostalgia and honor. The setup is solid, but the core story feels abbreviated; you're just getting to know Saladin and picking up speed as the five-mission storyline comes to a close.

You can find additional meat in a few excellent weapon quests, including a thrilling reforging of the epic Gjallarhorn. I'm also enthusiastic about the new artifact system, which offers new collectibles and reshapes the most boring inventory slot in the game into one of the most flexible, adding options like unlimited sprint or eliminating damage over time effects.

The new Plaguelands zone is beautifully crafted, mixing existing Earth art with the invasion of a twisted new nanotechnology, and then overlaying everything with a blanket of snow. I enjoy zooming through the area on my Sparrow, but it lacks the secrecy and depth of last year's Dreadnaught. Likewise, I appreciate the new challenge of the Fallen Spicers, but they don't feel distinct enough from the normal Fallen. The new Spicer-focused strike is excellent, including its devilish final encounter. But even the refreshed dialogue and enemies for two other strikes aren't enough to enliven the cooperative strike playlist, which really needs a more robust set of additions to be at its best.

Archon's Forge is a new arena activity that provides frantic enemy wave fights. The conflicts are intense, but the new mode is hamstrung by some baffling structural issues and needs some changes. Archon's Forge is too far out of the way to attract regular visitors, and doesn't encourage easy public joining once a round begins. Players can only hold one entry key and new keys drop infrequently, so your group's fun can come to a halt just as it begins.

The Wrath of the Machine raid is sophisticated and engrossing. The expedition is all about movement, collision, and communication with teammates. Filled with hidden chests, it's a paradise for treasure hunters. From a battle against a lumbering engine of destruction to a final showdown with a machine-warped monstrosity, the encounters are action-packed. I like how much they demand of every participant, not just a select few.

A new competitive Supremacy mode is great fun, borrowing a familiar structure from Call of Duty in which players pick up crests after a kill to score. The mode rewards close-range team clumping, but that means supers and grenades can be devastating. A single crest drop can cascade into a frantic skirmish where everyone converges on the scrum. The mode is fast and furious, and much more engaging when played with a coordinating team. It's also well supported by the excellent new maps, with lots of verticality, pathing options, and evocative themes.

Private-match functionality is also a major triumph. While options don't allow for dramatic reinvention of existing PvP modes, they support any existing game style and map to be played with chosen friends or rivals. For the average player, this is a great tool for practice and casual play. It also opens the door for Destiny to enter the tournament and professional gaming scene in a real way.

Whatever the activity, Rise of Iron has gorgeous new gear on offer as rewards, including new ornaments that change the appearance of weapons and armor. I'm disappointed that some of the coolest appearance options are mostly hidden behind a paywall of blind microtransactions, but I applaud the decision to keep the rewards cosmetic.

Rise of Iron provides a lot of choices to players. From the activity you engage in to the rewards you pursue, the expansion supports any level of engagement. While it doesn't offer the same breadth and reimagining of core systems found in the Taken King, Bungie's latest release has a sentimental tone that is refreshing. This adventure through forgotten legends stands strong on its own, and continues an unbroken string of content drops that have each made Destiny a richer universe. » Matt Miller

The Turing Test

Twisting the mind

gamesformer SILVER

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Bulkhead Interactive **Developer** Bulkhead Interactive **Release** August 30 **Rating** E

8.5

Xbox One • PC

In 1950, an English computer scientist named Alan Turing conducted an experiment to determine if a machine could exhibit lifelike behavior and fool someone into thinking it was human. He believed we would one day create such a being. His quiz later adopted the name "the Turing test." In the video game bearing the same name, developer Bulkhead Interactive draws heavy inspiration from this antiquated study, and uses it as a narrative and gameplay thesis to keep the player in a perpetual state of examination, either to concoct solutions for elaborate puzzle rooms, or to reflect on the meaning of life and question whether advanced artificial intelligence should be held to the same standard. It's a thinker of a game, a deep and complicated one, but it's also an immensely rewarding first-person puzzler.

Seeds of intrigue are planted within the first few seconds of play, when protagonist Ava Turing (the same first name of the A.I. that was put to a Turing test in the film *Ex Machina*) awakens from cryogenic slumber on a space station orbiting the Jupiter moon Europa. She was revived by the station's A.I. named T.O.M., which carries a soothing British voice and quickly establishes itself as highly intelligent. T.O.M. informs Ava that he has lost contact with a station's ground team on Europa. If that isn't reason enough for alarm, he then tells her that they uncovered life on the planet's surface. Ava is tasked to travel to their research station to find answers, and hopefully the team.

This story setup may sound like a typical science-fiction plot for a movie about mankind's first contact with killer alien bugs, but Ava's discovery is anything but rote. She learns that all of the rooms in the sprawling research station have been transformed into puzzles designed with purpose of differentiating man from machine. Only humans should be able to solve these riddles.

To learn what happened here, Ava must complete the tests, all while T.O.M. watches and studies her. You can see where this is going. You quickly learn that T.O.M. is not a typical A.I. – it thinks, shows doubt, and doesn't always seem to be honest. At times, Ava seems more like a machine as she works her way through the challenge rooms. This character dynamic is brilliantly executed, and is a constant through almost all of the game's 70-plus puzzles. I won't spoil where this game goes with its man-versus-machine thinking, but it's shocking, unexpected, and a wonderful surprise that still has me thinking a week after playing it. Bulkhead caps it all off with a crazy finale, one of the best moments I've seen in a game this year.

Most of the puzzles are also worth a showering of praise. Every room poses the same challenge: enter through one door and exit through another. That exit door is often locked or in a hard-to-reach place. Equipped with an Energy Manipulation Tool (EMT), Ava must redistribute energy found in the rooms to open doors and activate contraptions to find a path to the exit door. Most of the puzzles are designed with lateral thinking in mind, meaning you often have to think outside of the box to find a solution. A good example of this would be a human climbing over the walls in a maze instead of trying to find the circuitous route out.

Moving energy spheres within a room is an easy action (just grab it by pressing LT and fire it with RT), but it requires a great deal of thinking beforehand. Moving a blue energy sphere may open a door, but it may also cause another to close or a platform to lower. You draw these spheres into your gun, and need to figure out exactly how to use them through trial and error. Some stages took me over an hour to solve, as I was redistributing different colored energy balls all over the place, and moving blocks to activate pressure pads or block sensors.

This is the type of game where you enter a room and stand motionless within it for a good minute or two just to concoct a potential solution which is probably wrong, but should lead to other paths. The thought "what wouldn't a computer do" is something that I always fell back on when I would get stumped, and it actually helped me concoct unconventional solutions that are immensely satisfying upon completion.

The puzzles grow more challenging as the game progresses, but dips in the excitement periodically occur when new concepts are introduced. These ideas usually unfold within unnecessary tutorial puzzles. The story also stalls out a little in the middle of the adventure to hammer home ideas that have already been established.

The Turing Test joins Portal as another great puzzle game featuring an ominous A.I. entity. The puzzles will make you think, but not as much as the story's wonderful exploration of life. » Andrew Reiner

» Concept
A fascinating first-person puzzle game in which the player must use lateral thinking to solve puzzle rooms governed by an artificial being named T.O.M.

» Graphics
Get used to the colors white and gray. The sterile testing rooms all look alike, but are sharp in detail.

» Sound
Ava and T.O.M. are excellently voiced and are often the only things you hear in the game, other than the zapping of electricity.

» Playability
The puzzle rooms are challenging tests of logic. Timing-based movement is lightly peppered within them, but these tests are mostly about making you think outside of the box.

» Entertainment
It succeeds in both its puzzles and story, and emerges as one of the nicest surprises of the year.

» Replay Value
Moderate

9.5

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Improve the best sports sim on the market with myriad enhancements to MyGM, MyCareer, and the gameplay

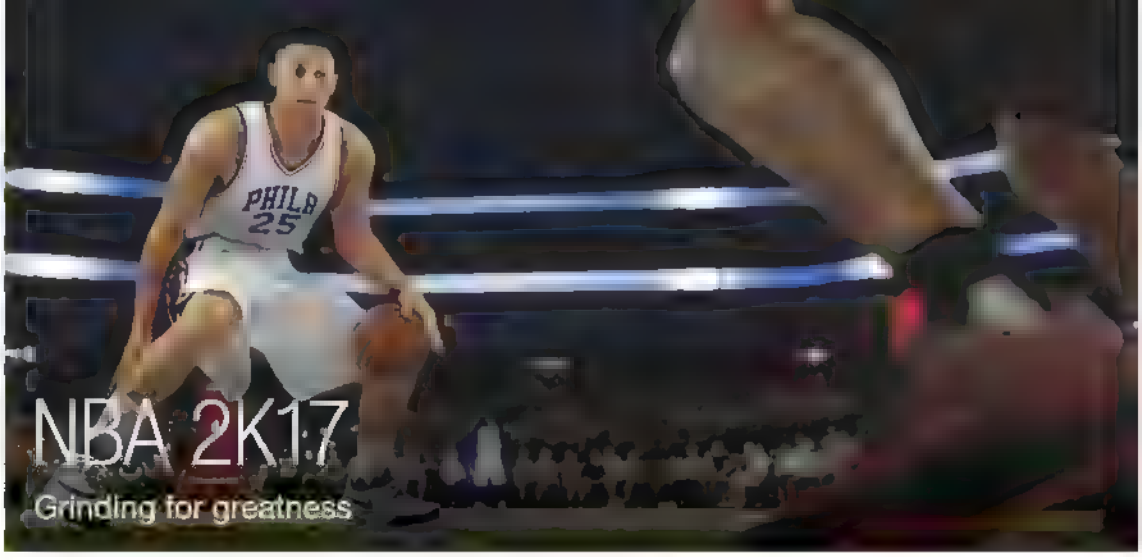
» Graphics
A greater variety of body types helps the players look more realistic, and authentic crowd touches bring the arenas to life

» Sound
The most impressive commentary in sports games gets better with guest analysts like Chris Webber, Steve Smith, and Brent Barry

» Playability
Still one of the most complicated sports games to control, but offers longtime players a lot to master

» Entertainment
With an abundance of deep modes and stellar on-court action, NBA 2K17 offers hundreds of hours of fun

» Replay Value
High



NBA 2K17

Grinding for greatness

gamesfarmer GOLD gamesfarmer GAME OF THE MONTH

Style 1 to 4-Player Sports (10-Player Online) **Publisher** 2K Sports
Developer Visual Concepts **Release** September 20 **Rating** E

Elite NBA players enjoy the 24/7 spotlight of national television, lucrative endorsement deals, and even occasional crossovers into Hollywood. But underneath this veneer of the charmed life are thousands of hours spent in gyms perfecting shooting strokes, honing dribbling moves, and sculpting physiques to withstand the rigors of an 82-game season. For better and worse, NBA 2K17's popular MyCareer mode looks past the glitz and the glamour to focus on the practical side of being a professional athlete.

A year after the Spike Lee debacle, MyCareer returns with a new narrative penned by screenwriter Aaron Covington *(Creed)*. Regardless of which organization drafts you, your team's rookie class includes an overlooked gem named Justice Young, played by the talented Michael B Jordan *(Creed, The Wire)*. Together, you strive to become the next great NBA tandem, following in the footsteps of Michael Jordan and Scottie Pippen. Your chemistry develops through cutscenes and hours of practice at the gym, and if you play off each other enough during a game, you unlock the ability to take control of the tandem. Controlling two players at the same time almost feels too empowering; lethal give-and-gos are unleashed at the push of a button, and Young rarely misses an open look.

Performing well in MyCareer is paramount to improving the skills of your player, who once again starts with an absurdly low rating in a shameless ploy to get users to take the easy path and spend money on the virtual currency. Regardless of which approach you take, you need to put many hours into the practice mode to round out your player. Earning currency via games played and endorsement deals is still the way to upgrade your primary skills, but certain critical skills like stamina and free-throw shooting can only be improved by grinding at the gym. Unfortunately, the path to upgrading these is needlessly opaque; even if you shoot free-throws for 20 minutes, you may not raise your rating a single point. After putting 20 hours into the gym activities – which offer great variety, by the way – I still don't understand the logic of when skill points do and don't get awarded.

These quibbles aside, MyCareer is once again the best offering of its kind in sports games. The allure of improving your player, earning endorsements, interacting with teammates, and spending currency on new gear is strong. My only wish is the narrative more effectively empowered player agency. Most dialogue choices are limited to two options, which often only differ slightly.

Embracing player expression is what NBA 2K17's MyGM and MyLeague modes are all about. Want to add six more teams to the Association with custom jerseys? Go for it. How about relocating and rebranding a current team? Have at it. 2K Sports gives you all the tools to turn your team of choice into a competitor, all while managing relationships with your owner, staff, and players. Hardcore features like adjusting player rotations by the minute, league-proposed rule changes each offseason, and being able to trade players during the season, draft, or offseason once again make this the most impressive franchise mode in sports games.

If you prefer to take your game online, NBA 2K17 offers options for both streetball aficionados (MyPark) and those who prefer simulation, 5v5 basketball (Pro-Am). The servers proved to be largely stable in my experience, with only some minor lag, and each has the infrastructure in place to be destination modes. My only major complaint is wishing MyPark would do away with the ridiculous "got next" format and let me immediately form a pick-up game with the other dozens of players standing around waiting their turn.

The ridiculously overstuffed suite of gameplay options extends even further with the inclusion of historic teams for head-to-head play and collectible card based MyTeam mode fashioned after EA Sports' Ultimate Team. This game has no shortage of ways to hoop.

Regardless of which mode you're playing, NBA 2K17 treats its players to best-in-class presentation and gameplay. Guest analysts keep the broadcasts feeling fresh, and this may be the best-playing NBA game to date thanks to some changes that limit the amount of canned animations signature players execute. The new shot meter extends to lay-ups and dunks, bringing an element of skill into play on formally automated shots. Off the ball, more physical contact between players brings an added level of realism to movement, though the increase in collisions also resulted in more animation clipping than I remember seeing the past few years. High-end players are much better at shooting through contact, which can be maddening when you feel you did everything in your power to stop them. Regardless, no sports game is better at capturing the play styles of the many different teams; each attacks just like their real-world counterpart.

In the world of sports sims, no other game feels like it's even on the same level as NBA 2K17. Visual Concepts continues to embrace innovation and add benchmark-setting features for hardcore fans. With unrivaled gameplay, presentation, and game modes, 2K Sports' latest hoops game is a must-play for all sports fans.

» Matt Bertz

NHL 17

Neutral zone trap

Style 1 to 4-Player Sports (12-Player Online) **Publisher** EA Sports **Developer** EA Vancouver **Release** September 13 **Rating** E10+

7.25

PS4 • Xbox One

» **Concept**
Add some popular features like team relocation and Draft Champions in hopes of making an otherwise average game good

» **Graphics**
The lack of face scans for recognizable players is even more jarring as we head into the 4K era

» **Sound**
Broadcast commentary from Doc Emrick and Eddie Olczyk feels disengaged from the on-ice action compared to other sports games

» **Playability**
Shooting, passing, and checking are all solid, but awkward pickups and player pivots slow down the game

» **Entertainment**
The on-ice play hasn't undergone a drastic transformation from last year, and outside of EASHL not many of the modes have long legs

» **Replay Value**
High

A lot of "state of the game" hockey chatter in recent months has focused on the modern NHL lacking true game-breaking performers. Scoring has stagnated and creativity has stifled as teams focus more than ever on defending and playing the full 200 feet of the rink. You could levy a similar complaint about NHL 17, which makes several safe changes across its various game modes but does little to truly distinguish itself from its predecessors or other sports games.

The generally competent gameplay from NHL 16 returns, with a few minor distinctions. The puck feels looser than it has in previous years, largely because subtle contact between sticks and bodies more quickly disrupts possession from the puck carrier. Goalies showcase a larger array of reactionary saves, and a new net-battle mechanic gives defenders the ability to tie up forwards parked at the mouth of the goal to prevent deflections. The net battles rarely manifest themselves in regular play, but prove a useful tool in the popular EASHL 6v6 competitive league.

All of these changes help the game better mimic its real-world counterpart. That said, NHL 17 still has problems with its transition game. Players sometimes pivot and turn with the grace of a cruise liner changing course, which hampers a defender's ability to move the puck out of the back end as the forecheck bears down. One of the touted changes for NHL 17 – puck pick-ups – seems improved in open ice, but don't be surprised to see players struggle along the boards and goal cages. These errors can often be chalked up to a lack of head tracking and awkward player orientation. I saw defenders put the puck in their own net, forwards filling in the slot only to back skate right before the puck arrives, and moments where several players struggle to locate the puck by the side of the goal.

The standout mode of NHL 17 is once again the EASHL, which is improved this year thanks to more diversity in the available player classes and a progression system that lets you unlock new team and player customization options. I'm still on the fence whether this class-based approach is better than giving players the ability to pick an archetype and customize within a set of parameters, but at least the current system makes sure the ice doesn't tilt too far toward players who invest all their time into the mode. The unlockable cosmetic jersey and arena enhancements let users add some personal flair to their teams, however, the options are limited. Empowering player expression by allowing them to create custom logos and choose from a greater assortment of player hair styles and equipment would make this fun mode even better.

The big selling point of franchise mode this year is team relocation, which lets users uproot teams to geographically similar locations (no moving the Arizona Coyotes to Quebec) and customize their new jerseys, team name, and arena. Team operations responsibilities also give you control of ticket/concession pricing and building maintenance, similar to Madden's owner mode. These aren't bad additions, but I would trade all of them for a competent scouting system, the ability to resign players during the season, and a lively free-agency period with bids and counterbids. Addressing these recurring deficiencies would go much further toward making this a fun mode than making users make mundane business decisions like when to repair a bathroom.

Single-player modes centered on taking one player through a pro career have proven popular in recent years, but NHL's version hasn't changed much. Commentators now acknowledge major moments in your career and coaches offer more detailed feedback that better instructs you how to improve your play. Even with these new touches, the experience feels bare-boned compared to the story-driven affairs like NBA 2K's MyCareer, and does little to capture the feeling of being a real NHL player.

Hockey Ultimate Team, a World Cup of Hockey mode, and the hockey version of the Draft Champions mode introduced in Madden last year round out the NHL 17 suite. Each of these offers a decent play experience, even if they lack the depth of other EA Sports games. Building via collectible cards in HUT is addictive, but it doesn't have the single-player offerings of its counterparts. The World Cup of Hockey doesn't let you make roster decisions to get snubs like P.K. Subban in the lineup, and Draft Champions lacks the strategic depth of the Madden version, largely because the player ratings are so inflated in NHL you never field a roster with a true deficiency.

I love hockey, so I'll play NHL 17 for most of this upcoming winter. But similar to my hometown Minnesota Wild, I have mixed feelings about the quality on display. EA Vancouver continues to make minor improvements across the board, yet the NHL series has yet to tap its true potential this generation. As any sports fan will tell you, there's always next year. ▪ **Matt Bertz**

FIFA 17

The start of a promising career

8.75

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

gamefan SILVER

Style 1 to 4-Player Sports (22-Player Online) **Publisher** EA Sports
Developer EA Vancouver **Release** September 20 **Rating** E

» **Concept**
Introduce The Journey story mode within the natural gameplay experience while retaining the rest of the traditional modes

» **Graphics**
The player heads look really good, but they are inconsistent in conveying the character's emotions in the story mode

» **Sound**
The voice actors do well, especially Hunter and his grandfather. Despite real-life managers appearing in the game, they are unfortunately mute

» **Playability**
The Journey can be played by player switching through the whole team or by being player-locked only on Hunter. Either way, the new physicality initiated by depressing the left trigger comes through

» **Entertainment**
Whether you're interested in the new story mode or not, the bevy of modes and slightly improved gameplay means FIFA 17 has something for everyone

» **Replay Value**
Moderately high

Real-life soccer players act out their own destinies on the pitch with each passing minute, but that's trickier in video games. FIFA 17's new mode, The Journey, has no shortage of inspirations; every match and season is full of them. But The Journey is in an ambiguous position: It gives the illusion that you're directing the tale of Alex Hunter, but you're neither in control enough of Hunter to take ownership of him, and the story of the mode itself can struggle to synch up to his actions. Despite this, The Journey has memorable moments and is an admirable first step worth experiencing alongside the series' customary modes and improving gameplay.

The Journey is an elaborate wrapper for the traditional Be a Pro mode, using the match rating feature to assess Hunter's performance based on the quality of his passes, shots, and positioning. This increases his abilities (along with his results in training sessions) and determines whether he's among the starting 11 each week. Hunter experiences the ups and downs as a young phenom in the English Premier League, and we get a glimpse of his personal life.

The mode is at its best when it captures Hunter's awe of the situation, such as signing with his favorite club from his childhood (which you choose). Like Hunter, I geeked out at seeing current first-teamers in the background and soaked up the occasion. The solid voice acting and character models add to these moments, as do settings like Hunter's childhood bedroom. Developer EA Vancouver smartly kept the story mainly confined to the world of soccer; it takes some detours into Hunter's family life, but they are only okay.

While the story is solid, I wanted more from FIFA's boasted advantage: licenses. Managers are mute and rarely seen, and you see little flavor from the club you're at, like its history, status in the standings, the supporters, and the players around you. It's Hunter's journey through a season with the club, but apart from the kit he's wearing and a few fictitious players he interacts with, it feels isolated from the supposed grandeur of the self-proclaimed best league in the world.

Part of this incongruity comes from the conversation system and process of training and playing in matches to upgrade Hunter's skills. Some events of the story are told no matter what Hunter does, and while I respect that the narrative needs to take precedence, it's inconsistent and sometimes frustrating to do well in training and in games, for instance, and not be treated according to those achievements.

You can play games in the mode either as the whole team, or locked to just Hunter. Playing as the team doesn't produce the satisfaction of being the character of Alex Hunter. However, player-locking to Hunter makes you more reliant on your A.I. teammates, whom you can command to pass, shoot, etc. They do alright in some situations, but they simply don't have the nous to avoid tactical dead ends, and sometimes even pass on a clear chance on goal. The grading system is also inconsistent and unable to understand that even a good first decision can eventually lead to a poor outcome.

Apart from The Journey, the series' usual offering of modes has some slight new wrinkles. Squad Building in Ultimate Team is like Madden's sets: Trade in cards to complete collections for payouts. Meeting the prerequisites is a puzzle that can be solved multiple ways.

Career mode includes more season objectives (financial, youth prospects, competitions, etc.), and thankfully not meeting them doesn't always mean instant termination – an improvement from last year. Unfortunately, one aspect of FIFA that is too similar to FIFA 16 is the women's national teams. Norway and the Netherlands are now in, but otherwise the popular feature is static.

FIFA's gameplay is on the ascent, but still has some frustrating moments where outcomes are predetermined despite your inputs, as well as occasionally dodgy passes and overpowered keepers. However, the control of your first touch and the increased physical play are assets. The latter is useful whether shielding the ball from an opponent (or vice versa) or trying not to be bossed around on corners.

The Journey isn't the be-all-end-all of FIFA 17. It's a good start that adds to the game despite its flaws, while the title is anchored by the overall gameplay and other modes. Solving the riddle of how to blend player agency seamlessly with a well-crafted story remains a tantalizing prize, one that will pay off handsomely when attained.

» Matthew Kato

This review pertains to the PS4 and Xbox One versions of the game. It is also available on PS3, 360, and PC. The Journey is not in the last-gen versions.

Pro Evolution Soccer 2017

Form is temporary. Class is permanent

gamerfomer GOLD

Style 1 to 8-Player Sports (Xbox One), 1 to 4-Player (PS4/PC), (22-Player Online) **Publisher** Konami
Developer PES Productions **Release** September 13 **Rating** E

9.25

PS4 • Xbox One
PS3 • 360 • PC

I generally hold the Pro Evolution series in high regard. Some years I may have thought the controls were needlessly complex, obscuring the larger gameplay, or wished the career or online modes were more substantial, but I understood and appreciated what was being attempted. PES 2017 crosses that line between an object that is admired and respected to one that is purely loved. The title is not perfect, but its gameplay is so natural it feels like there's little between you and what happens onscreen. Its modes aren't complete, but they are absorbing. Like anything that is loved, the answers may be incomplete but the feeling is total.

Gameplay has long been a strength of the franchise, but this year what stands out is how the controls and animations that govern what you see on the screen don't act as filters that translate your intentions. They rarely get in the way of what you want to perform on the pitch and what you expect to see. I'm not getting stuck in animations for as long, and I'm not even using some controls as much, such as double tapping for a standing tackle, since I can trust the game to resolve possession naturally.

Sports games often add animations from year to year, and while PES 2017 is no exception, the game does so without sacrificing any control or fluidity. One of the noticeable areas for new animations – physicality between players – goes hand-in-hand with another improvement for the title: better refs. Whether it's a player finishing off a crunching tackle, clipping a player's foot and getting him slightly off balance, or the flailing aftermath of two players contesting a header, the outcomes are not only cool to see, but fair. PES 2017 strikes a great balance of calling the fouls you expect to see without going overboard. Speaking of fixes, goalkeepers' saves are vastly improved and similarly balanced correctly – a massive improvement.

A revelatory demonstration of the game's controls, animations, and reffing occurred when I contested a loose ball. I performed a standard tackle like I would have done last year in anticipation of the other player getting the ball. I ended up stepping on my opponent's foot as a result and getting a foul. If I would have trusted the game instead, I would have won the ball and never gotten the foul in the first place.

Apart from the joy of controlling players, PES 2017 engages your inner manager through the new Advanced Instructions. These augment the usual normal preset tactics and are easy to implement. I can't tell you how smart it feels to switch tactics and open up play after being stymied by your opponent. I even became attuned to which players on my team were better suited toward which instructions. Additional maneuvering is possible through the new attacking and defending strategies for corners that create more movement and chaos in the box.

Just as enhancements in a few areas make a big difference in PES 2017's gameplay, the Master League career mode continues to improve. Separate transfer and wage budgets, the ability to set transfer policies for your players, and different loan periods enrich the mode. I also like that transfer-deadline day is broken down into hours, with each action performed taking time. It pays to plan your moves weeks in advance versus trying to address team needs at the last second.

While it's nice to see players adapt to being moved to new positions and being able to see exactly which attributes are affected by the expanded training options, I still don't fully understand how form is calculated in Master League. Furthermore, the mode needs to have a player morale system to reflect the personalities of footballers – an important component of the sport and putting together a squad.

In MyClub, assembling your dream team is easier thanks to the new auction system that allows you to find, buy, and combine agents and scouts to pull specific players. This system doesn't sacrifice the mode's overall mystery but lets gamers attain the players they're looking for.

Previously Pro Evolution has produced sublime moments on the pitch that felt like a big payoff, such as a wonderful strike for a goal. Those still exist, but they aren't in isolation. That feeling of jubilation happens all over the pitch and in the game, in moments big and small, and it increases when you realize that this is your game to control. Your game to conquer. » **Matthew Kato**

» Concept
Not content to rest on its laurels, Konami has put in the work to make this the best entry in the series and a must-play

» Graphics
The game looks sharp (although the Xbox One is a slight step behind in this department), with more recognizable faces. They look better when their mouths aren't moving, but they're still done pretty well

» Sound
The commentary takes another small step forward with more contextual comments and flow between the Jim Beglin and Peter Drury

» Playability
The series – already on the vanguard of gameplay – continues to refine its feel, with shots, dribbling, and passes feeling even better than last year

» Entertainment
An absolute joy to play, and with Master League and MyClub coming along nicely, this title is a force

» Replay Value
Moderately high

PS4 Vs. Xbox One

Like last year, PES 2017 on the Xbox One doesn't look as sharp as its PS4 counterpart, and it also lags behind because it doesn't allow you to use option files. Option files allow PlayStation and PC users to import fan-created files to re-create teams' real-life uniforms – very handy since the game doesn't have licenses for some well known teams and leagues.

World Of Final Fantasy

Capturing the past

8.25

PS4 • Vita

» Concept
Return to a traditional RPG format while revisiting your favorite parts of Final Fantasy history

» Graphics
The toy-like visual style looks great, and it captures the essence of the familiar monsters

» Sound
I was happy to hear the returning characters' voice actors reprise their roles. The new versions of old musical themes are also neat

» Playability
Exploration and combat work fine, but sifting through multiple screens to compare monster abilities and see their effects on your stack is a hassle

» Entertainment
The story is awful, but the fun of collecting monsters – along with a flood of fan service – makes the narrative worth enduring

» Replay Value
Moderate

Style 1-Player Role-Playing (2-Player Online) **Publisher** Square Enix **Developer** Square Enix **Release** October 25 **Rating** E10+

The last few mainline Final Fantasy titles made major modifications to the series' long-standing formula, experimenting with new structures and battle systems. World of Final Fantasy casts that aside, deliberately returning to its roots and celebrating the series' past, both in terms of cast and mechanics. You control twin siblings (Lann and Reynn) with the power to capture monsters, which is a thinly veiled excuse for players to embark on a greatest-hits tour of Final Fantasy's extensive bestiary. The range of beasts is impressive, from fan-favorites like Behemoths and Moogles to deeper cuts like Skull Eaters and Nightmares. You collect these iconic creatures, improve their stats, and teach them signature attacks, then use them in a battle system that surprised me with its depth – especially considering the game's cute aesthetic.

The concept clearly borrows from Pokémon, but World of Final Fantasy goes beyond this inspiration by adding satisfying layers of complexity. Instead of relying on the monsters individually, the real goal is combining their skills (and the protagonists') into effective ability sets. You do this by stacking them on top of each other according to their size categories, and though it looks ridiculous to see your characters with monsters precariously teetering on their heads, it opens the door for lots of cool experimentation. For instance, a stack with Ifrit on the bottom, Lann in the middle (the twins can be large- or medium-sized), and a Sylph on top gives you powerful fire powers and helpful support options. However, replacing the Sylph with a Flammantoise lets you absorb fire attacks, since its resistance compounds with Ifrit's. Once you get a lot of monsters and unlock their skills, the freedom to diversify or specialize is incredibly fun.

You only manage a two-member party in combat, since Lann and Reynn have just one active stack at a time and can't swap mid-battle. This sometimes makes battles overly simple, but the added challenge of toppling enemy stacks and capturing new creatures keeps the action interesting. Winning battles isn't hard; the challenge comes from meeting conditions necessary to recruit particular monsters. Killing a Tonberry King is easy, but getting its health low enough to make it vulnerable to capture without killing it is the real trick. The encounters drag on after you obtain everything cool in an area, but expanding your army with familiar beasts is a real treat for longtime Final Fantasy players.

The monsters aren't the only recognizable elements you encounter. The "what-if" world you explore is a tenuously connected mishmash of Final Fantasy hallmarks, including towns, characters, and musical themes. I can't list them all, but my time with previous Final Fantasy games was rewarded with constant nods, references, and cameos that made me smile.

If you like old-school Final Fantasy, this probably sounds like your prayers have been answered. However, a critical aspect of the formula is missing: the story. While seeing all of the established elements of the series is great, the newly created content is miserable. The premise is thin, but the pacing is especially bad. After you're introduced to the world and characters, the plot plateaus for the entire game. People say vague and cryptic things about a larger threat, but those statements never coalesce or escalate. I was at the 40-hour mark before anything made sense (the story is way longer than it needs to be), but the clarity comes all at once, so I was long past caring by then. Not only is the exposition weak, but almost every cutscene has painfully unfunny banter between the main characters – including an irritating magic fox who randomly inserts "the-" before the-multiple words in every the-sentence.

Similar to my experience playing Final Fantasy XIII-2, I eventually just had to tune out the plot to enjoy the gameplay. That's a shame, but it doesn't erase the entertaining battle system, the satisfaction of building an unstoppable monster collection, or the thrill of seeing your favorite characters back in action. The barrage of references might be lost on casual followers who don't have the nostalgia to draw from, but that's okay. World of Final Fantasy is aimed directly at fans with fond memories of the series' first 15 years. **» Joe Juba**

Other Modes

The core of World of Final Fantasy is the single-player campaign, but it has a couple of interesting bonus features. First is easy cross-saving between the PS4 and Vita versions (though you have to buy them both separately). Second is the ability to trade with and battle against other players. Though neither of these drastically alters the primary experience, it could impact how you choose to play.

Dragon Quest Builders

Building on a strong foundation

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Square Enix **Developer** Square Enix **Release** October 11 **Rating** E10+

8

PS4 • Vita

» **Concept**
Save the world by rebuilding it, one block at a time

» **Graphics**
Crisp, simple geometry provides a striking playground for a host of wonderfully adorable characters

» **Sound**
The audio pulls its weight, conveying tranquility while in town and adding an air of danger and mystery to exploration

» **Playability**
Building is simple and satisfying, while combat is mostly just simple. Fortunately, the game's charm and steady drip of new content makes it easier to overlook the one-note battles

» **Multiplayer**
Dragon Quest Builders is a great alternative for people who want more structure from a Minecraft-style experience – and plenty of structures to build

» **Replay Value**
High

Dragon Quest Builders is a spinoff of the seminal JRPG series that shelves turn-based combat and an epic storyline and trades them for something more along the lines of Minecraft. That's the initial reference most players will pick up on, thanks to the game's blocky worlds and emphasis on construction and base-building. Spend some more time with this little gem, however, and you'll notice that some of its sparkle comes from elements that bear a striking similarity to old-school adventures like The Legend of Zelda.

Your character's adventure starts out like many typical RPGs, though you quickly get the sense that he (or she) is cut from a different cloth. The world has been split and ruined by the nefarious Dragonlord, and you've been resurrected to help battle it out with the villain and his cronies. As the titular builder, you're the only person in the world who's capable of restoring the kingdom back to its former glory.

I get an odd sense of satisfaction from foraging and scrounging for resources in games, but if that kind of thing grates on you, beware. Like Minecraft, your early hours are spent punching branches to get wood, crafting crappy tools you soon outgrow, and building up your home base. Unlike that game, however, a more focused structure drives all that collecting for those who enjoy freedom but also appreciate a little guidance.

When your journey begins, you're stuck with the remains of a ruined village and a few crummy tools. Your village only has one inhabitant with big dreams and a bigger chore list. I enjoyed checking in with her between supply runs, and tracking down whatever she was looking for at the moment. She (and eventually, the rest of your tiny town) wants you to show off your skills by building requested items, constructing special structures from their blueprints, and scouting around for other survivors. Helping these little guys out feels good, even if their needs lean toward fetching items too frequently.

Building is as simple as dropping blocks down on an invisible grid. You can build whatever strikes your fancy, but that kind of freeform construction isn't likely to impress the townsfolk. Rooms are created when specific objects you build are placed within, and discovering new ones is part of the fun. Build a kitchen, and you can create new items to sate your hunger meter – and your villagers can cook for you, too. An inn gives people a place to crash, and also bestows a bonus for sleeping. Roofs are possible, but completely optional; that's good, since the camera has a tendency to lose its freaking mind when your character is exploring a tunnel or tight interior. I enjoyed wandering around my town and admiring the spaces I'd spent considerable time on, and there's enough flexibility in construction to leave your own mark on the world.

You're a builder, but you also end up doing quite a bit of fighting, too. You're fragile at first, but as you move away from clubs and toward steel hammers and suits of magical armor, you're more than capable of handling yourself in battle. The real-time combat is straightforward and simple, which reminded me of Link's original adventure. Enemies are adorable and wonderfully designed, but more importantly they drop valuable crafting items.

One of the most interesting things about Builders is its structure. Once you build up your community and take on the boss, you end the chapter and move on – a process that can take several hours. From there, you resurrect in a new land, with new biomes, threats, and people. You also start from scratch, and your character forgets many of the recipes and formulas learned in the previous land. I was stunned the first time it happened, but fortunately the crafting branches into different directions each time. While you have some overlap in each chapter, Square Enix has done a great job of ensuring each chapter has a unique feel and new gameplay elements, such as the ability to lead allies into battle or drive a vehicle around.

Even after beating the game, you have plenty to do. A freeform mode lets you build and share your creations with other players (though, curiously, it doesn't generate randomized worlds). Recipes and items are unlocked as you complete each chapter in the campaign, which lessens the sting of having to start from scratch in that mode. I'm eager to see what people create and share in Dragon Quest Builders, though I suspect the scope will be significantly less broad than what Minecrafters have built within that game's borders. It's possible to create huge castles, intricate homes, and other impressive structures, but the tools are more tailored toward domestic living than freeform construction and creating working in-game computers.

I'll admit that I'm a sucker for cute design, but that alone wouldn't have been enough to hold my attention for several dozen hours. Instead, the charming visuals work with a solid action/RPG that, while still a bit rough in a few small areas, is a surprising treat. » Jeff Cork

ReCore

Flawed to its core

5.5

Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Split the player's time between demanding platforming sequences and repetitive battles in a large (but mostly barren) open world

» Graphics
These low-resolution textures would've left gamers unimpressed last generation, and aside from your robot companions, the character models and animation don't stand out either

» Sound
The voice acting and music rise above the generic sci-fi sound effects and explosions

» Playability
Sometimes you feel like you're on unstable footing when landing, but otherwise the platforming feels good. Combat controls well, but gets repetitive

» Multiplayer
Horrendous load times, arbitrary progression restrictions, and downright confusing design drain ReCore of its potential

» Replay Value
Moderate

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Microsoft Studios **Developer** Concept, Armature Studio **Release** September 13 **Rating** T

When Mega Man creator Keiji Inafune and development talent from the Metroid Prime series get together, you can expect plenty of platforming, exploration, and robot animals. Unfortunately, any hope of ReCore being the ultimate Mega Man/Metroid hybrid proves as farfetched as Joule's mechanical companions. While ReCore's gameplay foundation is mostly solid, a host of technical and design issues stand ready to hinder your progress and enjoyment.

I was pleasantly surprised by ReCore's opening hours, mostly thanks to the intriguing sci-fi premise. You play as Joule, a colonial engineer who has awakened from cryo-sleep to find and fix whatever has stopped the terraforming process on Far Eden. Aided by your robot dog, you begin exploring the large desert world, sampling its myriad dungeons and fast-paced action, while collecting more mechanical companions along the way.

Once ReCore starts ramping up, however, the experience starts to unravel. Aggressive auto-targeting makes aiming during combat a non-issue. Instead, Comcept injects excitement into battles by making enemies so powerful that a few consecutive hits will kill you; you need to use Joule's double-jump and boost abilities to constantly stay on the move (and preferably off the ground). I'd be fine with the fast-paced and frenetic action if Joule's stagger animation – which is triggered by most enemy attacks – didn't leave you completely immobilized. The shameless A.I. is more than happy to capitalize on your vulnerability by whomping you with follow-up attacks, often ending in a frustrating death while you helplessly struggle to regain control.

ReCore's fickle combat is compounded by positively dreadful load times. Multiple areas take over two minutes to reload, no matter how cheap the death. Platforming sequences are thankfully immune to this problem, but the need to constantly move between zones, dungeons, "fast-travel" points, and Joule's sand crawler (the only place you can apply upgrades) means you're waiting almost as much as you're playing. This kind of egregious interruption is practically unheard of in modern gaming, and unacceptable.

Far Eden also quickly loses its luster. The open world is massive, but shockingly barren. Entire swaths of the map are devoid of anything but white sand and the occasional recycled rock. Outside of the dungeons, you don't have much to do other than collect crafting items and get into random battles. Some areas of the map are so bland and uneventful that they feel unfinished.

Even ReCore's adorable companions have their flaws. While each of the four collectible robot frames features a unique ability to aid you in traversal or exploration, you can only have two with you at any time, and must return to a fast-travel location to swap them out. That means all too often when you come across a gated area or secret in the world, you don't have the proper companion to explore it. Animal upgrades also stall as better frames require rare crafting items that you can't get without copious grinding. Even increasing their stats is perplexingly flawed – you have to boost each stat by slowly filling up a meter with your collected orbs, one level at a time, hundreds of times for each companion.

ReCore's biggest annoyance is its constant attempt to pad the length of its campaign by slowing down your progress. Each main story mission sports both a level and a prismatic core requirement. You gain these glowing orbs by completing "optional" side dungeons, but before you can enter most of them, you first must find a handful of collectible cellbots hidden in the world. My progress to the final tower, a five-floor gauntlet of platforming and combat challenges, was stalled for hours as I scoured the world for these dumb floating batteries, all so that I could snag a few more orbs.

Even worse, each floor of the final tower has its own increasing level requirement, yet doesn't offer enough XP to meet the next one. The result? After each area, I was forced to head back out into the world to grind in repetitive arena battles. This is a real shame, because otherwise the tower's devious challenges would have presented a satisfying culmination of your skills and a worthy prelude to the final showdown. Instead, they feel short and disjointed, and the final boss battle ends abruptly.

ReCore is a poster child for wasted potential. At its heart it's a good (though not great) game, marred by long load times, technical problems (including frame rates dips and the occasional crash), and bad pacing. The infuriating and frivolous road blocks may have doubled the length of the 20-hour game, but they also halved my fun. » **Jeff Marchiafava**

Forza Horizon 3

Fun Down Under

gamesinformer GOLD

Style 1-Player Racing (12-Player Online) **Publisher** Microsoft
Developer Playground Games **Release** September 27 **Rating** E

After exploring the rocky terrain of Colorado and the scenic street racing of Mediterranean Europe, the Horizon Festival has moved to Australia. As much as developer Playground Games tries to sell its appreciation of this country and its unique destinations (like the kangaroo-infested outback and pristine beaches of Surfers Paradise), this location was chosen with chaos in mind. The development philosophy behind Forza Horizon 3 must have been "What would Vin Diesel's character in *The Fast and the Furious* do in this situation?"

For an arcade racer of this variety, focusing on over-the-top track designs and stunts was the right call. Not only does this approach further distinguish this experience from sister series Forza Motorsport, it creates more racing variables and a hell of a lot more excitement for the people behind the wheel.

Forza Horizon has always delivered unconventional racing, such as a car taking on a biplane, but this sequel ups the insanity tenfold. I was shocked if a race didn't send cars roaring over jumps, through white-picket fences, or into vast pools of water. One race pits a buggy against a jeep, but the jeep is dangling precariously from an army helicopter flying dangerously through a forest. Another race has a Lamborghini racing a fleet of speedboats – and the Lamborghini actually races on the water at one point. Other activities include launching expensive sports cars as high as you can, drifting like a bat out of hell on busy streets, and tearing up farmers' fields to hunt for hidden cars. Most of these activities are fun, and the world has nice variety as you bounce from event to event.

Most races are awesome adrenaline rushes, and you can play them however you see fit. Outside of set Bucket List challenges, which force you into driving one car for a fun one-off challenge, you can bring any ride into races and championship series. If you don't like the weather conditions or number of laps, you can change them using the new Blueprint feature to sculpt the scenario that best suits your needs. There is no penalty for this, and you still reap all of the rewards. You can experience this game however you want, and that's a smart move by Playground. I used the car I saved up for as much as I wanted in the conditions that made sense for it, and I could almost endlessly tweak my favorite events to make them feel somewhat new.

While suffering from the typical open-world problems of some tracks sharing too much of the same design, and having to drive great distances to reach destinations, most of the racing and diversions are superbly crafted. The open world is sparse in the early parts of the campaign, but quickly ramps up to an almost overwhelming number of options.

The racing mechanics remain grounded in reality, offering a game focused on precision rather than using powerups to gain an edge. The guided waypoint system can be a little hard to track at times, but the bright flags are easy to see, and I found myself looking more at the world than the path that was telling me where to line up my car and when to brake. Every car I played controlled admirably. You approach turns in super cars differently than you do in classic rides. The offroad racing is some of the best I've experienced in a game, mostly due to how greatly terrain variations alter your speed and movement.

The player is continually rewarded through every second of play, even for driving poorly. You earn experience points for just about everything you do, and they eventually lead to a feast of rewards that can include skill points, new cars, and the size of a festival expanding. When a festival expands, new events appear throughout the world.

This is one of those games that continually made me smile while I played, not just for the extensive unlocks, but just from the sheer insanity and fun of the races. It also allowed me to dive deep into customization to make the game the way I wanted it, from easy-to-understand tuner options to quickly being able to jump into different cars.

Best of all, the entire experience can be played with friends. Along with 12-player competitive races and free-roam, the campaign accommodates four co-op players simultaneously. You can drop in and out, and all of your progress is saved. The races are even more rewarding with friends at your side, as your team's collective points count toward victory. The races are also more challenging, since the rewind functionality (which basically gives you mulligans) is disabled. You have to race well, which can be tricky with rambunctious friends sharing the lane. Just know this: You have to play a couple hours to unlock the online functionality.

The biggest misstep is in the head-to-head races against computer-controlled opponents. These events generate random short races that rarely deliver much excitement, and sometimes run into mismatch problems, such as an A.I. Ferrari going against your buggy. These races are sadly required to unlock specific street events.

Forza Horizon 3 is a delight, and it's one of those rare racing hybrids that should appeal to gearheads who want deep tuner options and people on the other end of the spectrum that just want exciting arcade racing action. It's this generation's best racer, and my favorite Forza game to date.

» Andrew Reiner

9.25

Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Explore Australia in this open-world racer that embraces player freedom, and isn't afraid to bang up cars or send them flying

» Graphics
At any given time, the environment is stimulating and loaded with variety. Around one turn, sunbeams bounce serenely off waves at The Twelve Apostles. Around the next, the landscape can look like a horror movie with rain affecting visibility in a darkened forest

» Sound
A nice selection of radio stations ranging from rock to club. Classics like "Flight of the Valkyries" are used in clever ways to heighten the excitement in specific events. Some songs also bring gameplay bonuses like additional XP, giving players reason to listen to every station for the chance to hear these tracks

» Playability
Forza Horizon 3 is an arcade racer at heart, catering to anyone with its flexible difficulty scale and races that can be completed with any car

» Entertainment
The Horizon series has been fun up to this point, but this entry stands above the others with its excellent open world and rewarding customization. It's easily the best racer of this generation

» Replay Value
High

Play Anywhere

If you play the Xbox One version, you can use the Play Anywhere functionality to continue your campaign on PC. Additionally, if your friend only has a PC, they can still play against you if you are on Xbox One.

Virginia

An elegant and riveting thriller

9.25

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
Solve the case of a missing child in a small town in this dialogue-free interactive thriller

» **Graphics**
A gorgeous aesthetic that balances cartoonish and realism, with characters' facial animations selling their emotions and thoughts

» **Sound**
A fantastic orchestral soundtrack that recalls *Miller's Crossing* and The *Silence of the Lambs*

» **Playability**
Virginia is easy to play and progress through, though the lack of character dialogue might prove vexing initially

» **Entertainment**
An engaging and surreal first-person narrative adventure packed with mystery and effective emotional moments

» **Replayability**
Moderate

gamesinformer GOLD

Style 1-Player Adventure **Publisher** 505 Games **Developer** Variable State **Release** September 22 **Rating** M

Since its narrative-driven revival, the first-person adventure genre has faced one seemingly impassable obstacle: how to capture the imagination of a larger audience. Most of these games are built on small moments, trusting the player to find some emotional resonance by going through an absentee person's belongings to earn a voiceover, or searching an environment for letters filled with beautiful prose. If you find such games boring or pretentious, Virginia could be the one to sell you on the genre.

Virginia takes place in 1992. You play Anne Tarver, who's just graduated from the FBI training academy and is on her first case: to find a missing boy in rural America. The game draws inspiration from the likes of *The X-Files* and *Fargo* but it's more than just a pastiche. For one thing, the entire game lacks dialogue, though there are classified documents and other readable objects that offer exposition. You have to interpret facial animations and actions to understand what characters are thinking. This might sound like a hassle, but Virginia executes this premise brilliantly, with every animation telling me exactly what I needed to know when I needed to know it. This forces us to engage with characters in ways we don't usually have to in games to make sense of things. For example, you and another character sit in a diner after finishing a meal. She's frustrated, looking away from you. She doesn't want to be here with you, she's clearly a guarded person. Did Anne do something to offend her? Is she just antisocial? The answer is revealed later, but that silent interaction is effective at introducing lingering questions.

The story finds an unexpected amount of strength in the relationship between its two central characters: Anne and her partner, Maria Ortega. Like any good buddy-cop procedural, the two don't like each other but their relationship takes unexpected turns in ways that are always compelling. I won't go into specifics here but I was constantly engaged by twists in the plot, which has a bevy of dramatic revelations as well as poignant character moments. The story contains a good mix of coherent and familiar elements (a mystery in a small town, a young agent needing to prove herself) as well as strange, dream-like sequences steeped in symbolism. Sometimes these elements even collide. The use of jumpcuts is great in this regard, transporting you from scenes in a startling fashion, even if all that's happened is you've gone from walking down a hall to finding yourself sitting in the passenger seat of a car.

The gameplay is simple, but that's not a bad thing. You are not making moral choices or shooting waves of enemies. You're progressing through a linear set of scenes by interacting with certain objects. This minimalist design results in something that feels more lean than it does lacking, letting the player explore beautiful environments like bars with peanut shells on the floor, observatories, and creepy churches at their own pace. The game offers a surprising amount of freedom in its corridor-like structure. If you want to take the time to check out this house for clues or to get a stronger sense of who the people are who live there, go ahead. If you just want to hurry around the environment to find the object that will get you to the next plot point, that's also a thing you can do. This approach keeps the player from getting bogged down by inventory systems or quick-time events.

Instead, Virginia is a clean experience that sets out to tell an old story in a new way, putting you in the shoes of someone with a lot to prove, struggling not to buckle under the pressure of her job. The cinematic structure is its trump card, playing out like an ordered collection of movie scenes, while housing the environmental exploration gameplay of Gone Home. The slow pacing of those games is replaced by urgency and mystery. The interactivity is both limited and precise in that what's here serves the experience, trusting the player to take the initiative and decipher both the big mystery itself and the shady pasts of the characters around them – and even Anne herself.

Virginia is a taut thriller that strikes a fine balance between storytelling and interactivity in a way that narrative-driven first-person adventure games have not accomplished since their inception, thanks to its blend of classic cinema and exploration. It should not be missed. » **Javy Gwaltney**

This review pertains to the PlayStation 4 version of Virginia. The game is also available on PC and Xbox One.

Pac-Man Championship Edition 2

All aboard the ghost train

gamesfurther GOLD

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Bandai Namco Studios Inc.
Developer Bandai Namco Entertainment **Release** September 12 **Rating** E

9.25

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
Make Pac-Man as fast and deadly to ghosts as possible while still making it a challenge

» **Graphics**
Neon, retro, and cutscenes mix across a number of selectable art styles

» **Sound**
Not every song is great, but most of them are fun and catchy techno music

» **Playability**
This is Pac-Man at his fastest, but if you have the right reactions, he's as nimble as ever

» **Entertainment**
The Adventure mode might be a little too laborious for some, but the score-based and practice mode give you everything you need to enjoy the new changes to Pac-Man

» **Replay Value**
High

At its core, Pac-Man Championship Edition 2 is still Pac-Man. You navigate mazes eating dots, and when you eat a power pellet, you give your enemy ghosts their comeuppance. But the Championship series tinkers with everything about Pac-Man, modernizing it to fit current standards. Championship Edition 2 updates the series yet again, all while proving its timelessness.

The biggest difference is speed. In Championship Edition 2, Pac-Man is less the happy-go-lucky puck you remember and more a bullet train of ghost destruction. The speed on each of the 10 courses starts slow, but ramps up to the point where just making a turn on time is a challenge, as the course changes every time you eat a fruit. The best path might literally be laid out in front of you, since early portions of the map have only one string of dots to eat, but making sure you follow it (or find your own, better path) is the fun part.

Championship Edition 2 builds on its predecessor in a number of smart ways. In DX, sleeping ghosts are strewn around the course, and when you wake them up, they follow you until you eat a power pellet, at which you point turn around and eat several of them at once. It's an incredible feeling, but Championship Edition 2 doesn't hand it to you on a silver platter. Instead, those enormous ghost trains scatter when you eat a power pellet, so you have to outmaneuver them.

As a reward for your hard work, when you eat the first ghost in a train, the view switches to an isometric perspective, giving you a more dramatic look at your ghost buffet. When you eat the last ghost on the current course, Pac-Man flies off the level as he eats the spiral of ghosts in the sky. It's a ridiculous, amazing moment you have to see for yourself.

Championship Edition 2 makes lots of other minor changes, almost all of them for the better. Bombs are no longer a get-out-of-jail free card, and the slow-mo close-up when you got near a ghost in DX has been replaced by the ability to brake whenever you like. You can run into ghosts twice before they turn angry and go after you, to compensate, sleeping ghosts attach themselves to active ones instead of following behind you, making them larger obstacles. The overall speed is faster, too. All these changes make it harder and more intense. In my best moments with Championship Edition 2, I feel like I'm just barely in control of the world's fastest ground vehicle, and its name is Pac-Man.

The game also gives you a few different ways to play with these changes. You can go for high scores in the main Score Attack mode, or you can practice on a course whenever you like for fun. Even without the external motivation to accomplish a task, running around these mazes is still a fun, frantic experience.

You can also test your skill in the Adventure mode, which tests your skill by having you complete challenges under a strict time limit. Adventure also adds boss levels, which have an enormous ghost made up of dozens of other ghosts floating behind the course at all times. These ghosts collide with the course as you play, angering every ghost and making things more difficult for you. When you finally get to the single power pellet at the end of the stage, Pac-Man becomes an army of Pac-Men, which then devours the dozens of ghosts that comprise the big one.

Each trial has three difficulties, and depending on which you choose, you get between one and three stars. In order to unlock each boss level and proceed to the next set of trials, you have to get a certain number of stars to unlock more trials. This isn't really a problem until you have to unlock the final boss level, which requires you to be finish every trial in the game on Pro difficulty. This turns the game into a chore, since at the point you're playing to accomplish a set goal that might be out of your reach instead of aiming for a high score. If running trials over and over again doesn't sound like fun, you can always hop back into the score-based mode.

Pac-Man Championship 2 is an outstanding example of a franchise reinventing itself. Bandai Namco adds just enough twists on Pac-Man to make it fresh for modern audiences while making sure the game is still Pac-Man, making for one of the best arcade-style games in recent years. When we talk about how so many franchises mine our nostalgia instead of trying something new, it's because games like Pac-Man Championship Edition 2 prove that with some revamping, our old favorites can still feel fresh. » **Suriel Vazquez**

The Score

8.5 | Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney – Spirit Of Justice

Platform 3DS **Release** September 8 **Rating** T

While Spirit of Justice brings little novelty to the series and relies on a familiar gameplay system, it nonetheless offers a story full of intrigue and puzzles that are satisfying to solve – Elise Favis

7 | NASCAR Heat Evolution

Platform PS4, Xbox One, PC **Release** September 13 **Rating** E

Hits the ground running with a career mode and 40-car online multiplayer, among other amenities, but a few hiccups and omissions make it a good restart rather than a trip to victory lane. – Matthew Kato

7.25 | Obduction

Platform PC **Release** August 24 **Rating** E10+

Obduction is the next project from the minds behind Myst and Riven, and in its best moments, it recaptures the wonder and nostalgic thrill of being immersed in a lonely world. – Joe Juba

9 | Batman: The Telltale Series – Episode Two: Children Of Arkham

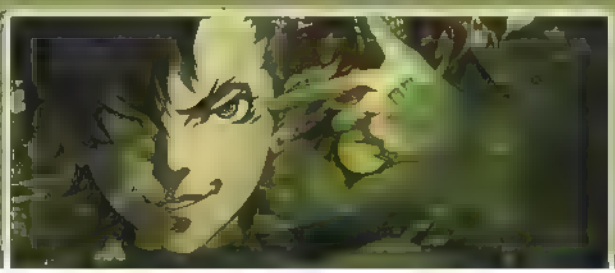
Platform PS4, Xbox One, PS3, 360, PC, iOS **Release** September 20 **Rating** M

This story makes you think about Batman's storied history as much as it wipes the canvas clean to tell a new tale with faces you've never seen before – Andrew Reiner

8 | The Legend Of Heroes: Trails Of Cold Steel II

Platform PS3, Vita **Release** September 6 **Rating** T

Cold Steel II takes the cast and story in such interesting directions and provides so much to do that it's hard to put down. If you enjoyed the first entry, you won't want to miss out on this follow-up. – Kimberley Wallace



8.5 | Shin Megami Tense IV: Apocalypse

Platform 3DS **Release** September 20 **Rating** M

A rare gem that stands out by featuring an absolutely off-the-wall narrative, flavorful characters and bosses, and masterful demonic fusion that is a massive boon for fans of turn-based RPG combat. – Daniel Tack

7 | Sonic Boom: Fire & Ice

Platform 3DS **Release** September 27 **Rating** E

This latest installment combines more seamless level design and a bigger emphasis on speed to help Sonic take steps toward redemption. – Brian Shea

8.25 | Overcooked

Platform PS4, Xbox One, PC **Release** August 3 **Rating** E

Overcooked is a wonderful local co-op experience and a party game that hits all of the right notes. – Andrew Reiner

Visit gameinformer.com/mag for the full reviews

PLAYSTATION 4

Abzû	8	Sep-16
Alone with You	7	Oct-16
Atelier Sophie: The Alchemist of the Mysterious Book	8	Jul-16
Bound	7.75	Oct-16
Brutal	7	Oct-16
Dangerous Golf	8	Aug-16
Deus Ex: Mankind Divided	7	Oct-16
Doom	8.75	Jul-16
F1 2016	8	Oct-16
Fun	6	Sep-16
Ghostbusters	4	Sep-16
Grand Kingdom	8	Sep-16
Iam Setsuna	7.5	Sep-16
King of Fighters XIV, The	7.25	Oct-16
Lego Star Wars: The Force Awakens	8.5	Sep-16
Madden NFL 17	8.5	Oct-16
Mighty No. 9	6	Aug-16
Minecraft: Story Mode Episode 6: A Portal to Mystery	7.75	Aug-16
Minecraft: Story Mode Episode 7: Access Denied	8	Oct-16
Mirror's Edge Catalyst	6.5	Aug-16
No Man's Sky	7.5	Oct-16
Overwatch	10	Jul-16
Song of the Deep	7	Sep-16
Star Ocean: Integrity and Faithlessness	5	Aug-16
Umbrella Corps	5	Sep-16
Uncharted 4: A Thief's End	9.5	Jul-16
Witcher 3: Wild Hunt – Blood and Wine, The	9.25	Jul-16

XBOX ONE

Dangerous Golf	8	Aug-16
Doom	8.75	Jul-16
Ghostbusters	4	Sep-16
Inside	9.75	Aug-16
Lego Star Wars: The Force Awakens	8.5	Sep-16
Mighty No. 9	6	Aug-16
Minecraft: Story Mode Episode 6: A Portal to Mystery	7.75	Aug-16
Minecraft: Story Mode Episode 7: Access Denied	8	Oct-16
Mirror's Edge Catalyst	6.5	Aug-16
Overwatch	10	Jul-16
Song of the Deep	7	Sep-16
Witcher 3: Wild Hunt – Blood and Wine, The	9.25	Jul-16

WII U

Lego Star Wars: The Force Awakens	8.5	Sep-16
Tokyo Mirage Sessions #FE	8.25	Aug-16
Mighty No. 9	6	Aug-16

PC

1979 Revolution: Black Friday	8	Aug-16
Abzû	8	Sep-16
Dangerous Golf	8	Aug-16
Dead by Daylight	8.25	Sep-16
Deus Ex: Mankind Divided	7	Oct-16
Doom	8.75	Jul-16
F1 2016	8	Oct-16
Fun	6	Sep-16
Ghostbusters	4	Sep-16
Headlander	7.5	Sep-16
Hearthstone: Whispers of the Old Gods	9.25	Jul-16
Iam Setsuna	7.5	Sep-16
Inside	9.75	Aug-16
Master of Orion	8.25	Oct-16
Mighty No. 9	6	Aug-16
Minecraft: Story Mode Episode 6: A Portal to Mystery	7.75	Aug-16
Minecraft: Story Mode - Episode 7: Access Denied	8	Oct-16
Mirror's Edge Catalyst	6.5	Aug-16
No Man's Sky	7.5	Oct-16
Overwatch	10	Jul-16
Quadrilateral Cowboy	9.5	Oct-16
Song of the Deep	7	Sep-16
Starbound	8.5	Oct-16
Stellaris	8.25	Jul-16
This is the Police	5	Oct-16
Umbrella Corps	5	Sep-16
VA-11 HA.L-A	8	Sep-16
Witcher 3: Wild Hunt – Blood and Wine, The	9.25	Jul-16
Zero Time Dilemma	8.75	Aug-16

WIIU

Climb, The	5.75	Jul-16
Edge of Nowhere	7.5	Aug-16
Time Machine VR	6	Aug-16

VIVE

Time Machine VR	6	Aug-16

3DS

Boxboxboy	8	Sep-16
Metroid Prime: Federation Force	7	Oct-16
Monster Hunter Generations	8.75	Sep-16
Rhythm Heaven Megamix	8.5	Sep-16
Zero Time Dilemma	8.75	Aug-16

VITA

Alone with You	7	Oct-16
Grand Kingdom	8	Sep-16
Zero Time Dilemma	8.75	Aug-16

IOS

Deus Ex GO	7.75	Oct-16
Hearthstone: Whispers of the Old Gods	9.25	Jul-16
Minecraft: Story Mode Episode 6: A Portal to Mystery	7.75	Aug-16
Minecraft: Story Mode Episode 7: Access Denied	8	Oct-16

gameinformer Volume XXVI • Number 11 • Issue 283

STAFF

Publisher
Cathy Preston cathy@gameinformer.com
Editor-in-Chief
Andy McNamara andy@gameinformer.com
Executive Editor
Andrew Reiner reiner@gameinformer.com
Managing Editor
Matt Bertz mattbertz@gameinformer.com
Senior Reviews Editor
Joe Juba joe@gameinformer.com
Senior Previews Editor
Matt Miller miller@gameinformer.com
Features Editor
Kimberley Wallace kim@gameinformer.com
PC Editor
Daniel Tack daniel@gameinformer.com
Digital Editor
Brian Shea brianshea@gameinformer.com
Senior Editors
Matthew Kato kato@gameinformer.com
Jeff Cork jeff@gameinformer.com
Ben Reeves ben@gameinformer.com
Senior Associate Editor
Jeff Marchiafava jeffm@gameinformer.com
Associate Editors
Kyle Hilliard kyle@gameinformer.com
Javy Gwaltney javy@gameinformer.com
Elise Favis elisefavis@gameinformer.com
Suriel Vazquez surielvazquez@gameinformer.com

Creative Director
Jeff Akervik jeffakervik@gameinformer.com
Senior Production Director
Curtis Fung curtis@gameinformer.com
Senior Graphic Designer
Laleh Azarshin Tobin laleh@gameinformer.com
Graphic Designers
Samm Langer sammlanger@gameinformer.com
Jen Vinson jenjervinson@gameinformer.com
Web Designer/Programmers
Margaret Andrews margaretandrews@gameinformer.com
Kristin Williams kristinwilliams@gameinformer.com
Video Producer
Ben Hanson hanson@gameinformer.com
Video Editor
Wade Wojcik wadewojcik@gameinformer.com
Circulation Services
Ted Katzung ted@gameinformer.com
Audience Development Manager
Paul Hedgpeth paul@gameinformer.com
Senior Product Manager
Lisa Wagner lisa@gameinformer.com

ADVERTISING SALES

Associate Publisher
Rob Borm rob@gameinformer.com
Advertising Sales Director
Damon Watson damon@gameinformer.com
Senior Advertising Sales Associate
Amy Arnold amy@gameinformer.com
Advertising Manager
Janey Stringer janey@gameinformer.com
Marketing Coordinators
Rachel Castle rachel@gameinformer.com
Mark Burger mark@gameinformer.com

CUSTOMER SERVICE

For renewal, address change and Power Up Rewards Pro details:

Visit: **www.gameinformer.com**
Email: **customerservice@gameinformer.com**

or send correspondence to:
724 North First St., 3rd Floor
Minneapolis, MN 55401 • Attn: CIS Dept

For subscription inquiry ONLY:
† **(866) 844-GAME (4263)**

Manufactured and printed in the United States of America. The Editor welcomes company product information for all video games. Such materials should be addressed to: Editor, Game Informer Magazine, 724 North First St. 3rd Floor, Minneapolis, MN 55401. Unsolicited manuscripts cannot be returned or acknowledged. Copyright in all screenshots contained within this publication are owned by their respective companies. Products named in these pages are trade names, or trademarks, of their respective companies. All rights reserved; reproduction in whole or in part without permission is prohibited. Game Informer™ is a trademark of GameStop. PUBLISHER LIABILITY FOR ERROR: The publisher shall not be liable for slight changes or typographical errors that do not lessen the value of an advertisement. The publisher's liability for other errors or omissions in connection with an advertisement is limited to republication of the advertisement in any subsequent issue or the refund of any monies paid for the advertisement. INDEMNIFICATION: The advertiser and/or Advertising Agency agrees to defend and indemnify the publisher against any and all liability, loss, or expense arising from claims of libel, unfair competition, unfair trade practices, infringement of trademarks, copyrights, trade names, patents, or proprietary rights or violation of rights of privacy resulting from the publication of the Advertiser's statement.

Alliance for Audited Media
The New Audit Bureau of Circulations

geeked at birth

University of Advancing Technology
UAT
Learn. Experience. Innovate.

You may speak the language, but are you geeked enough to make the games?

Here's a chance to prove it.

UNDERGRADUATE DEGREES

uat.edu/majors

Ranking The First-Party Controllers

Which console controller is the best of all time? We voted to find out.

by Kyle Hilliard

The controller is as important as any aspect of a video game console. The software lineup could be stellar, the technical performance amazing, and the aesthetic design sexy, but if the controller is uncomfortable or difficult to manage, then players will go with the competition. Through the years there have been fantastic highs and abysmal lows in the world of first-party console controller design, so we decided to rank nearly all of them.

Nintendo did not invent the controller, but with the release of the NES in 1985, it established what we consider to be the modern controller archetype: movement on the left, actions on the right, and menu-related buttons in the middle. Its predecessor controllers were of a much different, sometimes beguiling design (see sidebar), but the NES set a modern standard that we mostly continue to follow today and are looking at for this ranking. This of course discounts the mouse and keyboard. For many gamers, it is the preferred way to appreciate video games, but it is not a device pared down to its core components for the express purpose of playing a video game. Let's go to the ranking.

25. Sega Master System controller Sega saw what Nintendo was doing with the NES controller and thought, "Let's do that, but not as good." It has fewer buttons than its main competition, without start, select, or equivalent buttons. It also confusingly labels the buttons "1 Start" and "2." Its attempt at improving on the d-pad by adding in an additional four directions is admirable, but it gave the controller a soft, unresponsive feeling.

24. Xbox controller The original Xbox controller, affectionately nicknamed "The Duke" by those unfortunate enough to try and play Halo with it, was arguably Microsoft's biggest stumble into console gaming. The massive controller was uncomfortable to hold, regardless of hand size, and its buttons were small and difficult to reach.

23. Jaguar controller With its nine atypical buttons set in the middle, the Jaguar controller had the potential to intimidate, but those additional buttons had some interesting applications. The console's Doom port, for example, would assign those buttons to specific weapons. Games even came included with overlay sheets to place on top of the buttons. Outside of those innovations, however, the controller was unwieldy and uncomfortable.

22. Sega Saturn controller The follow-up to the Genesis

controller retained many of its mediocre traits (e.g., mushy d-pad), but functional design decisions. Extra buttons are good, but placing them in a row is not great for quick access, and the questionable beveling was generally uncomfortable.

21. Sega Saturn 3D controller Sega deserves a lot of credit for its early work on the analog stick with the 3D controller. It was among the first controllers to feature what we now consider a standard form of input. Despite its innovations however, it was bulky and uncomfortable.

20. Wii remote and nunchuk The Wii remote and nunchuk opened the doors for a new generation of gamer to embrace video games. Its motion functions made everyone, regardless of gaming history or skill, able to play. It was also versatile, becoming something similar to an NES controller when turned on its side. Unfortunately, its limited buttons lead to strange configurations and gripping the nunchuk for extended play sessions often led to cramped fingers.

19. Sega Genesis controller The Genesis controller was comfortable, but it had a few major problems. The d-pad, especially when compared to its SNES competition, felt loose and imprecise. Also, the three-button horizontal configuration does not work as well as the four-button layout based on cardinal directions.

18. Nintendo 64 controller Arguably the strangest controller ever to be adopted by the mainstream, the N64 had innovations in its control stick and the set of buttons designed with camera control in mind. It also functioned as the standard d-pad controller we were used to. For many though, its complicated design created a new barrier for those already intimidated by video games.

17. PlayStation controller Sony's original design was not a complicated one. It smartly replaced the standardized practice of assigning buttons with letters in favor of shapes, which made their locations easier to remember. The d-pad separated the four directional buttons, which wasn't ideal, but worked far better than Sega's take on the d-pad.

16. Wii U Pro controller The alternate Wii U controller is a get-the-job done kind of controller. It looks similar to the excellent Xbox 360 controller, but feels breakable without the weight of the vibration feature. The face buttons and d-pad could also stand to be moved outward by just a few millimeters.

The Classic Controllers

[illegible] the right of the [illegible] [illegible] [illegible]

15. PlayStation 3 Sixaxis controller Sony debuted the PlayStation 3 with a monstrous "Boomerang" controller, so the world cheered when Sony decided to go back to basics and slightly modify the PlayStation 2 controller. Unfortunately, the lack of weights related to the excised vibration feature made it feel light and flimsy, and the motion sensing technology didn't work well.

14. NES controller The NES controller set the standard for the modern controller. Directional pad on the left, buttons on the right, and pause in the middle. It made so much sense that nearly every controller following it has used it as a template. Its creation was important to establishing the controller as we know it, but it's a rectangle with sharp angles that's awkward to hold.

13. Wii U GamePad The Wii U GamePad is big, which understandably scares many off, but it feels surprisingly comfortable thanks to excellent ergonomics and responsive buttons. The d-pad is great (something Nintendo has always been good at), but it sits low on this list because of its poor battery life and the presence of the now useless TVii button.

12. GameCube controller The GameCube controller is so well-regarded that Nintendo continued to support it into the Wii U's lifespan. It's incredibly comfortable to hold provided you don't have big fingers, but doesn't function well in every genre. Some genres, like the FPS, don't fare well with the small c-stick, and the mushy shoulder buttons were always a little strange.

11. Dreamcast controller For the Dreamcast controller, Sega looked at what the Saturn 3D controller did right and wrong, and reacted appropriately. It moved the shape and control stick forward, and finally abandoned the horizontal buttons. One of the controller's biggest claims to fame was its memory card, which had a display showing animations and game data.

10. GameCube WaveBird controller It wasn't the first wireless controller, but the Wavebird was arguably the first to make players realize a wireless controller could be lag-free and feel just as good as the standard model. Among the main appeals of the Wavebird was its ease of use and that it did not feel any different from the standard GameCube controller.

9. PlayStation 3 DualShock 3 controller Sony stumbled slightly with its first crack at the PlayStation 3 controller, but the follow-up, which re-incorporated vibration, felt much better. It was the same ergonomic design, and had the same backward shoulder triggers, but it feels sturdier overall, especially when compared to its Sixaxis counterpart.

8. PlayStation DualShock controller Sony's first DualShock controller, which arrived later in the PlayStation's lifecycle, was so good that Sony didn't functionally redesign the thing until the PlayStation 4. It was the first controller to feature two analog sticks, which was strange at the time. The bet paid off, though, and the dual-analog stick is now the industry standard.

7. Xbox controller S Originally only available in Japan, the S controller came to America after Xbox players collectively pointed out that the controller included in the box was awful. Functionally identical to the original "Duke" controller, with Microsoft's signature staggered analog sticks, the S was significantly more comfortable thanks to its smaller size.

6. PlayStation 2 DualShock 2 controller The big change to the PlayStation 2 controller from the PlayStation DualShock controller was pressure-sensitive buttons and the color – and that was about it. Sony did a good job the first time around, and recognized that changing the controller had the potential to alienate those who had grown fond of it during the previous generation. It was the right choice.

5. PlayStation 4 controller The PlayStation 4 controller marked Sony's first dramatic design change. It's comfortable, has a full touchpad/giant button, and a dedicated social media button. The

ight on the back can be a nuisance and the launch version of the controller used cheap rubber on the control sticks, but Sony has addressed those concerns and the controller has improved from its already solid design.

4. Xbox 360 controller
Microsoft's second (or third attempt after the S) knocked it out of the park. It feels good, has a great layout for its shoulder and color-coded face buttons, and has excellent wireless functionality. It doubled in use for many to also become a quality PC controller. It also established the home button in the center of the controller, which is now a standard.

3. SNES controller
The sequel to the NES controller is widely regarded as a favorite. The d-pad is high-quality, the face buttons are responsive, it added shoulder buttons for the first time, and the rounded edges made it comfortable to hold. It established the four-way face-button layout that is now standard and it all just felt exactly right.

2. Xbox One controller
Microsoft has improved its controller design dramatically since its early stumble with the "Duke." The Xbox One controller is solid, has multiple battery options, the best rubber ever affixed to a control stick, and small touches like additional vibration features dedicated to the triggers. It feels great in your hand, and takes a lot more than one disappointing session of Dark Souls to shatter.

1. Xbox One Elite controller The current generation of controllers are fantastic, and have earned their high spots on our list. Both the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One controllers feel great and have worthwhile functions both new and old, but Microsoft took things a step further for the Elite controller. The price is steep, but the durability, customization options (both in design and programmability), and overall feel make it our favorite controller we've ever used.

The Museum Of Questionable Gaming Controllers

Forever reserved for the younger sibling or that friend you just don't like very much, the third-party controller is rarely as good as the first-party controller. They often, however, offer strange and unprecedented ways to interact with video games.

Novint Falcon
The Novint Falcon (pictured) is a strange-looking USB haptic device that simulates the act of holding and moving a gun. It was specifically designed with first-person shooters in mind, and worked well by most accounts, but had very limited support.

Steel Battalion controller
Released in 2002, Steel Battalion and its dedicated controller is known by most as that weird Xbox mech game with the crazy controller. Its 40-button controller had many of the functions you would expect, like shooting and moving, and some you wouldn't, like activating windshield wipers.

Intel Wireless Series gamepad
Intel's PC gaming device looks like an airplane neck pillow and a video game controller got mashed together to craft something no normal human would ever want to use to play a video game.

SpaceOrb 360
Much like the Steam controller, the SpaceOrb 360 is notable for its efforts to put PC mouse gaming functions into a controller. It had some fans during the Quake era of gaming, but it failed to overcome the competition.

Wii Sports accessories
These aren't controllers per se, just plastic shells that hold a controller. But for some unexplained reason everyone thought you needed to make your controller look like a tennis racket if you wanted to play Wii Tennis. You didn't.

Fan controllers
Sometimes games get intense, leading to sweaty hands. Thankfully, brave manufacturers like Mad Catz stepped up to the plate to try and solve this dilemma by inserting fans and vents into controllers.

Gamester FPS Master controller
It didn't take long for console FPS players to realize that, even with two control sticks, shooters were still hard to play with a controller. Gamester tried to remedy this with a controller that looked like a pair of guns and rerouted all the buttons so you never had to remove your thumbs from the control sticks.

Go Back Down To South Park

Here are the episodes to watch before The Fractured But Whole

by Kyle Hilliard

The Fractured But Whole takes place only a few days after the concluding events of The Stick of Truth. In the real world, however, three seasons of the show have aired between the two games. It's a good idea to watch all three of those seasons ahead of Fractured's release, but these episodes in particular are recommended viewing before seeing what the kids are up to in the new game.

Season 6, Episode 6:
"Professor Chaos"
Butters has become a *South Park* staple since his introduction, and he serves as a big antagonist role in Fractured as Professor Chaos. This is the episode where Butters invented the persona.

Season 8, Episode 1:
"Good Times with Weapons"
This 2004 episode is a fan favorite and a great example of the kids playing a game that is real to them, but imaginary to all those around them. This is a big aspect of Fractured, as the kids all pretend to be superheroes.

Season 12, Episode 13:
"Elementary School Musical"
This episode is notable for introducing relatively minor character Scott Malkinson. Malkinson and his superhero alter ego, Captain Diabetes, has a much larger role in the game than he has so far in the show.

Season 13, Episode 2:
"The Coon"
The Coon and Mysterion are the focal conflict of Fractured, and this is the episode where both characters were introduced. The episode serves as a spoof of many of the popular superhero films of the time, like *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight*.

Season 13, Episode 5:
"Fishsticks"
Kanye West appears in this episode, getting increasingly frustrated by a joke he does not understand. Trey Parker teased West's inclusion on stage at E3 2016, so it would be a good idea to remember how he made his way into *South Park* lore.

Season 14, Episodes 11, 12, & 13:
"Coon 2: Hindsight," "Mysterion Rises," and "Coon vs. Coon and Friends"
Season 14's three-part run has the most direct line to Fractured, as it introduces nearly all of the hero alter-egos that appear in the game. It outlines everyone's abilities, including which kids have real powers and which ones are only pretending. And it features Cthulhu.

Season 15, Episode 14:
"The Poor Kid"
Though not a mainline Coon episode, "The Poor Kid" features Mysterion (Kenny's alter-ego) as he confronts his family's poverty and helps his younger sister.

Season 18, Episode 9:
"#REHASH"
One of the rare episodes that features a guest star and not just Trey Parker doing a celebrity impersonation, #REHASH explores the phenomenon of watching people play video games online and prominently features PewDiePie.

Season 19, Episode 6:
"Tweek x Craig"
The most recent episode on this list, "Tweek x Craig" explores yaoi, the Japanese art form focused exclusively on romantic relationships between male characters. In the episode, Tweek and Craig become unwilling subjects of yaoi art, and that forced relationship extends into Fractured.

Game Informer Magazine® (ISSN 1067-6392) is published monthly at a subscription price of $19.98 for 1 year or $24.98 for 2 years by Sunrise Publications®, 724 North First Street, 3rd Floor, Minneapolis, MN 55401. (612) 486-6100 or FAX (612) 486-6101. Canada & Mexico orders must add $25/yr additional postage; all other international orders add $35/yr. All orders must be prepaid in U.S. dollars by check, money order or credit card. PowerUp Rewards™ Pro Card may be purchased for $12.00 (includes $7.00 S&H). For subscriptions, back issues, or customer service inquiries call toll free at (866) 844-4263 or mail publisher at above address. Periodicals postage paid at Minneapolis, MN, and additional mailing offices. SUBSCRIBERS/POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Game Informer Magazine®, 724 North First Street, 3rd Floor, Minneapolis, MN 55401. POSTMASTER: Send all UAA to CFS.

A SHOWDOWN FOR SKIN SUPREMACY

GEL
THE PROTECTOR
RESERVOIR

©2016 Edgewell

★VS★

THE OLD SCHOOL
LUBE STRIP

Schick
HYDRO®
FREE YOUR SKIN®

The new Schick Hydro® is designed like no other razor to knock out irritation. Its protective gel reservoir delivers 40% less friction than a lube strip.* So leave your face undefeated with Schick Hydro.

*Average vs. Quattro Titanium lube strip

US $5.99 | EUR €5.99 | UK £3.99

Issue 283 • November 2016

www.gameinformer.com

Made with love by

Our goal is to preserve classic video game magazines so that they are not lost permanently.

People interested in helping out in any capacity, please visit us at retromags.com.

No profit is made from these scans, nor do we offer anything available from the publishers themselves.

If you come across anyone selling releases from this site, please do not support them and do let us know.

Thank you!